SHORT STORIES

THE DAINTY HOME STORY PAPER. TARTAN COVER. No. 10.—MACFIE.

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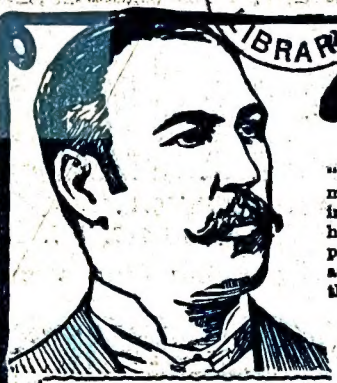

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Short Stories

No. 757.] [One Penny.

Week Ending July 4th, 1903.

That Sweet Little Fool.

THE ROMANCE OF A SECRET MARRIAGE.

The question which I found so difficult to answer was "What shall I do with Betty Dalrymple?"

Screen her I might, give her sanctuary in my home, but, there was no doubt about it, Betty was to blame—greatly to blame. The girl's action made me indignant—angry, rather than anything else. You see, I had idealised Betty. I thought that her pride alone would have forbidden her to take such a step. Well, I was mistaken. By this time her name was in everybody's mouth and neither she nor her family would be able to stir out of doors without meeting the curious gaze of every passer-by.

I, Elizabeth Dalrymple, am Betty's aunt. At the time of which I am writing I lived in the greatest retirement, in the suburbs of Darlington, at Briar-rose Cottage, a sweet, secluded spot, hedged about with an old-fashioned garden.

Now, it was natural enough that my niece and god-child should come to me in her hour of trouble, but that an old maid, like myself, should be called upon to play so important a part in the girl's love affairs was the marvel.

One day I was sitting in dreamy abstraction, in my sunny morning room busy with my fancy work.

A soft wind breathed rapturously in at the open window. The laburnums tossed their golden tassels and the lilacs blossomed everywhere. No sound was heard save the murmur of a brook, three fields away, the hum of the bee, the twitter of the birds, and the inarticulate voice of Polly in her gilded cage.

On this particular morning I was supremely happy. No restless feeling, no disturbing presentiment warned me of approaching trouble. With a sense of the keenest enjoyment I had settled myself at the table behind my embroidery frame, but scarcely had I worked in a dozen stitches when the sound of approaching wheels caused me to lift my head and listen.

"A cab at my front door! Who can it be?" I said to myself. A feeling of curiosity prompted me to push back my chair, go to the window and peep behind the curtain, for now the sound of an arrival permeated Briar-rose Cottage. Someone was certainly coming along the hall. A door slammed. A chair was thrown down. The dog barked and through all the commotion I heard an unmusical, rasping voice—a voice that brought a flush of annoyance to my cheeks—call out: "Here, Prudence, take my parcels! Bless me! where is the girl? Never at hand when wanted. Elizabeth, Elizabeth! Where are you? E-liz-a-beth! Here am I, come by the early train from Newcastle on purpose to see you."

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The door of my morning room was thrown open, and Mrs. Dalrymple, my brother Tom's widow, stood on the threshold.

I know I ought to have met her with outstretched hands and honied words of welcome. But I did not. I certainly was not pleased to see Maria and it was against my principles to appear so. You see, we have nothing in common. Maria has any amount of confidence. She is also frightfully extravagant, while I am retiring and careful—almost niggardly.

When, on rare occasions, I invited Maria to spend a day with me I always prayed an especial prayer for patience, but this time I was taken unawares. So instead of meeting her with Christian fortitude, I offered her a limp hand which she held for a moment and dropped. Then I waved her to a seat on the low settee and sitting upright in my high-backed chair I took off my spectacles and braced myself for battle.

"Well, Maria," I said tartly, "what is it you want?"

Maria drew a long breath of astonishment as she unfastened her feather boa.

"My dear creature, how uncomfortable of you! Want—the idea. Do you know it is eight months since you and I exchanged confidences, and that I have come on purpose to see you?"

I laughed shortly.

"Then I know you have come begging," I insisted. "You would never dream of coming to see me unless you wanted something."

"My dearest Elizabeth, you are so suspicious. Is there anything more terrible than to be misunderstood? The fact is, I am not well. I felt that a day's rest would be soothing to my nerves so I came to you. Besides, I have something to tell you—something about Betty. But won't you ask me to take off my bonnet? And mayn't I stay to dinner?"

By this time I had become a little ashamed of my ill-humour.

"I am sorry if I misjudged you, Maria. Stay by all means," I said with a slight degree of cordiality. "Ring the bell, please."

Her summons was answered by my one maid, Prudence Strong, who looked flustered and rather cross.

Now Prudence had lived in the service of the Dalrymples since she was a girl. She would have broken her heart if I had not taken her to live with me when my mother died. Prudence was a treasure. She managed everything. Sometimes I caught myself wondering if she or I were the mistress.

"Prudence," I faltered, "Mrs. Dalrymple will stay to

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dinner. Can you—that is—have you time to go into Blackwellgate to order a little fish ?"

The woman's lips tightened.

"Indeed, I cannot, Miss Elizabeth, you know that. I wonder you ask me, mum, ironing day. There's plenty for dinner though—cold lamb, a salad, custard pudding and a fruit tart."

With that she shut the door and tramped back to the kitchen.

And Maria laughed and hoped I would not make the slightest difference on her account.

A simple meal was therefore provided and we sat down without ceremony.

Maria fidgeted about from room to room all the morning. Nothing escaped her inquisitive eyes. She knew everybody's business and talked incessantly, yet did not again refer to Betty.

The afternoon was one of golden sunshine and creeping shadows. We went into the garden—such an odd-looking couple.

Maria was well over forty, inclined to stoutness. She had on a trailing dress that rustled over and swept the greensward, and a wonderful hat. "Parisian" she called it. I, Elizabeth, am well over fifty, tall, angular, sharp-featured. I strutted by Maria's side in goloshes, a dress made short and scant, a garden hat of the mushroom order, and a faded velveteen cape.

We sat under the old apple tree and talked.

"Well, Maria, what about Betty ?" I queried. Maria laughed.

We were sitting on a seat which I had had built round the trunk of the old apple tree.

"Ah, this is nice !" she said with a sigh of satisfaction, not heeding my question. "My dear Elizabeth, at this moment I positively envy you. While the mood lasts I too would follow your example, dress in a nun's garb and hide myself in some quiet elysium, for at times the hollowness of my Society friends palls upon me."

I sniffed witheringly.

Maria was a creature of moods, she was not easy to understand.

Presently she asked : "Guess what I have to tell you about Betty ?"

"I am not good at guessing riddles," I said shortly.

"You must prepare yourself, Elizabeth, for a great surprise. Our—dear—Betty—is—engaged. Don't look at me like that ! Engaged, I tell you, and to that dear, Cyril Dare. I always said that those two dear things should marry and I meant to manage it somehow. You don't care for him ? You think his temper arbitrary and over-bearing ? My dear Elizabeth ! A landed proprietor, a man of good means, handsome, fascinating, clever. What more could any girl desire ? True, there is a slight disparity as to age, and, yes, I grant you, Cyril Dare is somewhat masterful—but—why he has wanted to marry your god-child for the last four years. As for Betty—well—Betty is Betty—proud and wilful."

So Maria rattled on. To me the news was startling and so unexpected that it almost took my breath away.

"Stop," I cried, "Betty engaged ! Betty about to be married ! Does she—tell me, Maria—does she love this man—this Cyril Dare ?"

I hurled the words at her quite fiercely.

"Love ? Really I never inquired. You foolish, sentimental Elizabeth, what a question. It will be a practical, sensible marriage with good settlements, so I am satisfied."

"You are a horrid, heartless woman, Maria—you do not deserve to be a mother," I said hotly. "Stop chattering for a moment—do ! I want to think !"

If the truth were told I wanted to cry. Betty had been away for four long years, she had only just returned to the home-nest and now again she was on the wing. And yet, I will not deny that for some reasons her engagement delighted me. Why should I not be pleased ?

Four years ago I had strongly opposed this alliance for I knew that Betty's heart was given to Rex Davidson.

Rex was a mining engineer, and Betty would have married him, there is no doubt, but for a dreadful accident which befel him. One day, when in the coal-pit, fathoms below the beautiful earth, a deafening explosion shook the air. Huge pieces of coal were hurled from side to side of the narrow passages. Whether Rex was hit or not he did not know for the darkness of night overshadowed him and he sank down unconscious. He must have lain near to the borderland for weeks before he awoke to the fact that he was hopelessly disfigured, a heavy weight of coal having fallen upon his face. The marvel was that he was alive. Poor Betty ! Of course she could not marry a man whose features were marred beyond all recognition—a man whom the children were terrified to meet. I must confess that I could not blame her, and yet—and yet——

When they told Rex that Betty no longer loved him, he was dreadfully cut up, poor fellow. But he was too brave a man to die for any woman's love. So he shouldered his burden, and left the country to fight under Kitchener in the Soudan, where he lost his life. Betty wrote to me that she was going abroad with some people of high rank as a sort of companion to an invalid girl ; that she expected to spend some years upon the Continent, travelling about from place to place. "I long to get away from gossiping Newcastle," she wrote, "and by the time you see me again I shall be quite Bohemian in my tastes and ways. But you will love me still, auntie, *whatever happens* because you are a true woman. I cannot come to say 'Good-bye.' Why ? The reason why you will some day know."

For answer I sent her a cheque for one hundred pounds.

Betty was eighteen when she left Newcastle for the Continent, she had been home four months and she was now two and twenty. Here I awoke from my reverie.

"Dear Betty," I said very quietly, "I hope she will be happy. Will the engagement be a long one, Maria ?"

"Certainly not," she answered with some abruptness. "What on earth is there to wait for ? 'Strike while the iron is hot,' say I. The wedding will take place at Westgate Road Chapel six weeks to-day."

Here she launched into a detailed description of the dresses to be worn at the wedding and the reception which was to be a brilliant affair. But all the time Maria was speaking I felt that she had an end in view, that she was holding herself in check.

"The expense will be simply awful," she continued. "Why, my dear, the bride's dress alone will be twenty guineas. No, you need not be alarmed, Elizabeth. I promised Betty that I would not appeal to you for help, and I won't. 'Mamma,' she said in her proud way, 'if you dare to sponge on aunt Elizabeth, I will not be married.' Tiresome Betty, her idea is a quiet wedding—a travelling dress and so forth. Think of our position. What would people say ?"

"Maria," I said icily, "you see I was right ; you have come begging. Do not try to disguise the fact ; for in this case I am perfectly willing to—"

"Just my own words, my dear. 'Betty,' I said, 'you are unkind to your aunt.' Nothing, my love, would delight her more than to, as Lord Byron said, 'Clothe you like the sun for your bridal.'"

I shrugged my shoulders irritably and said : "It is certainly my pleasure that my god-child should be married as befits the eldest daughter of the house of Dalrymple."

Whereupon Maria leant forward, flung her arms round my neck and said I was a dear, sweet, generous darling.

"I cannot thank you enough," she repeated again and again. "And now there is another small matter." Maria coughed uneasily.

"About yourself, dearest. We shall be bitterly disappointed of course, but I know the excitement would be too great—that you would not be comfortable meeting the McLeans', and the Cowans, and that dear Lady Riddle. We must not forget your years. Your love of retirement must be humoured, but I shall see to it that you have wedding-cake, and——"

"I do not understand you, Maria." But I was wrong, I

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understood her too well. Strange as it may seem, Maria wanted only my money—of me she was ashamed. She thought I should disgrace her in some way—I should be shy, and awkward—perhaps odd. I shook from head to foot with indignation. No doubt Maria saw she had made a mistake for she hastened to say:

"Of course if you really wish to——"

"Certainly, I wish it."

"How good of you! So glad. Delighted! Now do let me order for you a perfectly appointed costume from Bond Street."

"No, I thank you. I have a dress quite suitable for the occasion."

"There, now I have offended you, haven't I? Well, dear, we won't quarrel, have everything your own way. Why, I declare, there's the cab. Goodness!" she cried, looking at her watch. "It is four o'clock and my train leaves at four thirty, good-bye," and with a parting nod she was gone.

During the next few weeks there was a rare amount of talk and surmise between Prudence and myself over the coming wedding, but upon the eve of that all-important day I felt nervous and fidgety.

Every preparation was made for the journey on the morrow.

My sister-in-law lived in Rye Hill, in a red-brick, five-storied house, just opposite to St. Mary's Church.

Had she forgotten that I was coming by the mid-day train? There was no one to meet me at the Central Station and there was no one to bid me welcome when I arrived at my destination. A smartly-dressed maid opened the front door when my cab drew up and beckoned me to follow her. So I toiled wearily up the stairs to a small room at the very top of the house—an attic room—with a slanting ceiling. Here the girl put down my dress basket and said she would bring me a cup of tea when the kettle boiled and would I excuse her mistress; the house was full of company and she was very much engaged.

I frowned and a stinging retort rose to my lips, but it died away unspoken, for the girl had gone and in her stead stood Betty.

My beautiful Betty in her wedding-dress of shimmering white satin. We clung to each other, cried a little, and then smiled through our tears and admired the dress. Betty said it was a shame that I should be put in that poky little room, but that her mother had no management. Only wait until she had a home of her own. She would show them how to treat her most honoured guest—her dear aunt Elizabeth.

Before leaving my room I was completely metamorphosed in appearance. The short, scant skirt was discarded for a handsome flowered brocade. I wore a poke-bonnet, too, although it was not quite in the fashion—trimmed with broad white ribbon, and pink rose-buds, and a costly shawl of old Brussels lace pinned at my throat with a heavy cameo brooch. I had arranged for a private brougham that I might appear at the church in a fitting manner. Mr. Reginald Hoker had been appointed by Maria to share my carriage. I had pictured to myself a middle-aged gentleman of military bearing, it was somewhat disappointing to find him a school-boy in an Eton jacket.

We sat under the old apple tree and talked.

As we went up the aisle hand in hand quite a titter of amusement greeted us. Someone said in a stage whisper: "Old maid. Very eccentric."

I sat down and looked about me. It was a brilliant day. The sun shone brightly behind the stained glass window and the guests were pleasantly excited. The bridegroom's face I did not admire as he stood, waiting by the communion rails. Now and then he glanced down the aisle. He looked impatient, bad-tempered, anxious. Every time he turned his head half a churchful of people turned theirs too, in expectation. But the bride still tarried.

A pretty group of bridesmaids stood at the entrance waiting her arrival. They held baskets of choice flowers tied up with pale blue streamers and their pretty faces looked girlish and sweet under their broad-brimmed hats.

"She is coming," somebody whispered.

A false report, Betty still lingered.

Another half hour went by and still no Betty. The bridegroom was restless. The guests toyed with their flowers, fluttered their fans and looked at the clock. The clock chimed the quarter, in another fifteen minutes Betty would be too late. What could be detaining her?

Again the sound of approaching wheels. A carriage drew up. The bride had arrived. No, it was only Cuthbert Faber, the grey-headed gentleman who had promised to give her away. Evidently something was wrong. Mr. Faber walked hurriedly through the church to the vestry. Cyril Dare followed him and did not return. Maria had the sense to keep her seat but her face paled. She told me afterwards

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that she had a subtle intuition as to the real condition of things.

"They are saying," whispered the serene Miss Butler, who sat by my side, "that there will be no wedding to-day. Is it true, dear Miss Dalrymple?"

No wedding! I opened my mouth to deny such a statement but no words came. Presently I realised it was all too true, and found myself in a crush of tired, disappointed people, who were thronging the aisle. Maria put her hand on my arm as I was leaving the church. The smile upon her face—not a very pleasant one—met with no response from me, for a dreadful suspicion that Betty had eloped with some unknown lover haunted me. I shuddered at the thought.

The news of the postponed wedding had spread. At the door of the church and in the road a group of people had gathered, full of curiosity. A row of dirty, ragged children climbed up the railings.

"Miss Dalrymple's carriage!" thundered a burly constable and murmurs of excitement broke out at the sight of me.

Well, we went back again to Rye Hill, thankful to hide our disconcerted faces from the public gaze.

The house was in a terrible state of confusion and alarm. Betty had mysteriously disappeared. People were running up and down the stairs looking for her. Of course the reception was postponed, and Maria was in hysterics. Glad enough was I to find myself again in the attic-room with the slanting roof. With a sigh of relief I attempted to remove my finery. My hands were trembling, but they trembled still more as I picked up a letter addressed to me that had fallen from the table to the carpet. With a fast-beating heart I broke the seal, and, sure enough, the letter was signed "Betty."

"Tell mamma," she wrote, "that I shall never marry Cyril Dare, never, never! Tell her not to look for me, that I shall not come home again. No woman could act as I have done and continue to live in the same town. Forgive me, auntie, we shall meet again, but not on this side of Heaven will you know how dear you are to me."

Well, it was a weary time before I could get away from Rye Hill. First I must compose myself, then read the letter to Maria, and what with one thing, and what with another, it was getting dark before I left the house.

Not altogether, even then, could I get away from the vexatious subject. Along the platform ran an evening newsboy calling out at the top of his voice, "Fashionable wedding postponed. Mysterious disappearance of a bride!"

Everybody in the compartment seemed to stare at *me* as I hastily dropped my veil.

Rain, rain, rain! It beat upon the windows and came down in torrents when at length we reached Darlington. Oh, I was so glad to be at home again. It seemed to me that for years and years I had been away from Briar-rose Cottage. When I alighted from the cab at my own gateway I actually laughed with delight, as I ran under the dripping elm tree to the porch.

There was a bright light behind the red blind of the kitchen window, the rest of the house was shrouded in darkness. But it didn't matter, nothing mattered for I was at home again. Home, sweet home. With nervous fingers I pulled the old bell that dangled among the ivy and before it had ceased to ring, Prudence opened the door.

"It is no fault of yours, Miss Elizabeth," she said at once.

"Then you have heard, Prudence?"

"Heard? Why the whole town is blazing with the news—the evening papers is full of it. I was just saying to—there—I forgot." Here she whispered in my ear. "There's a person in the kitchen waiting to see you. She was just going, for I told her you would not be coming now it had gone nine o'clock."

"To see me?" I asked incredulously, "who is it, Prudence? Do you know her?"

"Bless you, no! I never set eyes on her before in my life. A middle-aged woman with a towsled, carroty head, and a green tartan shawl."

I opened the door of the old raftered kitchen and there, bent almost double, sat the woman with her face to the fire.

"What can I do for you, my good creature?" I asked.

At the sound of my voice she rose to her feet and turned to look at me. The faded shawl slipped from her shoulders, and, with the greatest composure she removed her bonnet—and—yes—actually a wig of red hair. She stood before me tall and stately, a young and beautiful girl in a tailor-made gown. Her face was pale and in her brilliant eyes there glowed the fire of a great resolve.

Prudence uttered a faint little scream.

"Lord-a-mussey!" she cried; "did ye ever see, why, if it ain't Miss Betty! Lor', how bad I do feel!"

"What fooling is this?" I said, staggering against the wall for support. "Betty Dalrymple, I—I am ashamed of you!"

Was I? The man was to be pitied indeed who had let such a girl slip through his fingers.

"I am sorry for that, aunt, in my extremity I came to you."

Every tone of her voice, every action of her small, white hands made you feel her pride, her independence.

"And pray, what excuse have you to make for your scandalous behaviour?"

"No excuse."

"I demand to know why you have caused all this trouble and confusion."

"It is quite impossible for me to explain at present. You see, auntie, it is not altogether my secret."

"Secret? Fiddlesticks! Am I to be made a laughing stock? Is it nothing to you—the dishonour—the scandal—the—the great expense?"

Betty flushed hotly. Her voice was clear and cold.

"I am not unmindful of all you have done for me, auntie. I came here to-night intending to tell you something—a secret of my past life. Oh, I have had trouble enough, God knows." she said with a sad little laugh. "Now, I cannot tell you my secret, you are not in the mood to understand. You will allow me the shelter of your roof for to-night? I am going to bed. Is my room ready for me, Prudence?"

Now had Betty been humble, if she had knelt at my feet and wept, if she had begged forgiveness things would have been different; but her coolness angered me.

"Listen to me, Betty," I said sternly; "you are not only wicked, but deceitful, and ungrateful. But duty is duty, I shall certainly send a wire to your mother to-morrow morning."

"Do so, aunt, by all means, your triumph over me will then be complete."

"You carry things with a high hand, young lady," I said, "but, mark you, it does not follow that because I have left you all my money that I cannot make a fresh will."

Betty made a gesture of the most scornful disdain.

You see, I was so angry that my fiery tongue ran away with me. Oh, had I but known the unutterable yearning of Betty's heart for one word of sympathy.

That stupid Prudence was shaking like a leaf.

She seated Betty in the old rocking chair and knelt down to unfasten her wet boots.

"There, mistress," she said, "do be quiet! You are only making a rod for your own back. Your niece is the very fiddle of your heart, as everybody knows. Come your ways, my honey, to your bed, and I'll bring your supper up. It's mightily tired ye all are."

Ere Betty left the kitchen she put her arms round my neck in the old impulsive way, but I repulsed her. I am not the woman to be bought over by any show of affection. Half an hour later I slipped quietly to the door and turned the key in the lock, thinking it were better to be on the safe side. In my dreams that night the teasing question wrote itself in blazing letters on my brain. "What shall I do with Betty Dalrymple?"

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Prudence told me, in the morning, that she couldn't get a wink of sleep for listening to the restless girl who paced her room hour after hour like a lioness in a cage.

"Her room is now as silent as the grave itself, Miss Elizabeth," she continued. "Sleeping? May be she is. The cup of tea I took her up an hour ago still stands upon the door-mat."

"Hark!" I said with uplifted finger, "I hear her moving about. Yes, you can make the coffee, Prudence, I will go upstairs myself and bring her to reason," for strange to say I had forgotten the locked door.

The key was well oiled and turned easily. I tapped lightly on the panel and, receiving no answer, entered the room.

"Betty? Why—" I began and then came to a pause for the room was untenanted and the window wide open. I stood aghast, leaning against the door-jamb for support. fear took hold of me. I lost control over myself and with my hands to my ears I fled down the long landing.

"Help! Help! Thieves! Murder!" I cried in terror, my shrill quavering voice echoing through the old house.

Prudence came panting up the stairs and took me by the shoulders but it was quite a long time before I could make her understand what had happened. "Gone? Where? How?" she kept repeating. Then she said, grimly, that it was just what she had expected and that the girl would surely do herself a mischief. There was no doubt about it, Betty had escaped by the window. She was a daring athlete. To take a leap from the sill to the outstretched arms of an old apple tree hard by was nothing to her.

By-and-bye Prudence left me, and I sat alone in the white window seat of the empty room, but my eyes were so full of tears that I could not even see the roses that clung to the casement distinctly. I shut the window and jerked down the blind. What had I to do with the gladness of the summer morning. All the shine had faded from life—gone with Betty. How could I be so cruel to her? Oh, how could I be such a shrew? Ah! There lay the sting.

As one in physical pain I paced the room, then hid my quivering face in Betty's pillow, and then, with a half-smothered sob, I tried to pray.

In an hour's time I went into the garden, listless, crushed, and broken-hearted, there I sat, counting in a stupid way the tall white tiger lilies in the oval flower-bed.

I thought I had nothing left to live for; but life is full of sweet surprises. All at once I heard the sound of pattering feet, and a sunny child, with tangled curls and lovely questioning eyes of blue, toddled up to my chair. She carried a sleeping kitten in her pinafore, and, putting her hand in mine, she lisped in baby language:

"Are 'oo kying, poor lady? Shall me lend 'oo my Kitty?"

A strange yearning filled my heart as I lifted the little creature on my lap and covered her sweet face with kisses.

"What is your name, my little one?" I asked softly.

"Darling," she answered. "Darling stop with you, poor lady; come and see box?"

"Whose darling are you, little one?"

"Muvver's. Come and see box?"

I muttered something inarticulate and rose to my feet. My woman's curiosity was aroused, and the ache in my heart was growing less.

In an instant we were hurrying along a winding, overgrown path which led through the shrubbery to the garden gate. Suddenly I caught my breath.

"Box, box!" cried Darling, sitting upon a small portmanteau which someone had put inside the garden. It was directed to myself in Betty's handwriting. "Darling's box. Muvver coming soon." The baby's lips quivered.

"Oh, what does it all mean? Oh, Betty, this is terrible?" I faltered as my fingers caught at the label and tore it to atoms. This then was the wicked secret of her past life. Then there rose, in my heart a wonderful happiness that thrilled me through and through. God had sent this little child to me—to be my very own. This was His gracious answer to my prayer. And even as I stood there at the garden gate staring down with misty eyes at the darling, I wondered if it were wrong to deceive Prudence. After all, I argued, this was a family skeleton to be locked away in the cupboard of secrets.

"Oh, my little lamb, worse than motherless," I cried. "You are mine, mine! My very own!"

Presently, all unnoticed, we entered the morning room by the French window.

As one in a dream I turned over the frocks and dainty garments the portmanteau contained, while Darling stamped her tiny feet impatiently, in her eagerness to show me everything at once. Her shrill young voice awakened the echoes in the sleeping old house and brought Prudence in, wondering, from the kitchen.

"Prudence," said I, trying to speak firmly although my heart went pit-a-pat. "This little girl has come to stay with me for—a time. Her name is Lizzie, Lizzie Jones, but she calls herself 'Darling.' Her mother is my dearest friend, we were at school together. She is now very ill—travelling I mean. You will have heard me speak of Annie Clarke?"

This fairy tale must have been a suggestion of the Evil One, and it cost me many tears of repentance.

"I hope, mistress," said Prudence scornfully, "that you don't expect one of my years to believe that trumped-up story. Miss Elizabeth, you are hiding something. Haven't I served you faithful, that you should treat me so?" she said with a

With the greatest composure she removed her bonnet—and—yes—actually a wig of red hair!

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sob. Already her rough hands were laid in a loving way on the child's curls.

Suddenly a triumphant little laugh escaped Darling.

"Muvver, Muvver!" she cried, clapping her hands and running to the hearthrug above which hung a life-size portrait of Betty.

Then I knew Prudence must be told everything. Wonderingly she listened to my story, my description of foreigners and their evil ways, and the many pit-falls of Continental life. When at length I said, "Keep the story to yourself, Prudence, what else could I do but trust you?" she laughed a little loud and scornful laugh.

"What!" cried she, "noise such a story abroad? Me? Why, mistress, I don't believe a word of it. I think 'ill of our Miss Betty? Never! I would die first! Mark my words," she continued, with a knowing wag of her head, "you will prove yourself in the wrong before many days come and go." Then she stopped and caught up Darling in her arms and carried her off to the kitchen to feed the kitty.

Prudence is a good woman, but dull and heavy. She has no fine feeling—no intuition.

Two whole days came and went and we were so occupied with our treasure that we gave no thought to the future or what it might bring for us.

An evening of surprises at length arrived.

At five minutes to nine we had retired for the night. At a quarter past nine the front bell door rang loudly. In the lightest of attire Prudence and I issued from our rooms and met on the landing. We listened attentively. Again and again clanged the bell, and at length Prudence, being the braver of the two, crept down the stairs, shading the candle with her hand.

"See that the chain is up before you open the door!" I called to her over the banister.

"Who's there?" cried Prudence.

But whoever it was they had gone away—not however, before waking Darling. With wide open eyes I found her standing up in the old wooden crib. Her golden curls were tossed and her pretty cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Muvver!" she cried—"Muvver's coming."

Scarcely had I soothed Darling to sleep again when the window rattled. A branch of an old apple tree had touched the glass as the wind swept by. Yet I listened with my heart in my mouth, then I heard someone crying.

"Let me in! Let me in!"

The voice was strikingly familiar and as I turned in terror I saw Betty's face, looking through the window.

I shook like an aspen leaf. How my palsied fingers managed to unhasp the casement to let her in is a marvel. She had again climbed the old apple tree, swung herself on to a projecting piece of masonry, and by the help of waterspouts and ivy, drawn herself up to her old room where a bright light was burning.

"Betty, you might have been killed!"

"Betty, you might have been killed. Oh, how could you? Oh, my darling—my darling!" For some minutes I was quite hysterical. She tried to dispel my fears by laughing gaily.

"There is no danger," she said. "Besides, auntie, you compelled me to do it. First you lock me in, and then you lock me out, I was really obliged to use the staircase provided by Nature."

She crossed the room to bend over the old crib.

"Mine," she whispered.

"Aye, my dear one, I know. But what brings you here, Betty? Never fear, I will take care of the child and no one shall guess at your secret."

"I couldn't rest, auntie, I couldn't; I felt lost without my baby."

"But you must not stay, my dear. Already there are some very queer tales afloat about you. Not that I take any notice. I am not the one to cast the first stone. No doubt, poor child, it was not altogether your fault. Have you any money, Betty? You shall want for nothing while I live. But you must go away, my dear, right away, for Darling's sake, her mother's fault must not be visited upon her."

"Go away, right away? What are you talking about? Oh, auntie, auntie, I wouldn't have believed you could have had such bad thoughts of me."

A great restlessness came over her.

She hugged and kissed me. She rang for Prudence and hugged and kissed her. She took Darling in her arms and, sitting on the edge of my bed, asked us, with a radiant face if we had never guessed that she was married—married four long years ago to Rex Davidson.

I stared but was speechless. Prudence stared but was speechless.

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Apparently not noticing our helpless condition Betty told of her clandestine marriage with Rex some weeks before he left the country, and her suffering, when the news came to her of his death—of the birth of her child in a foreign land, and her unfortunate resolve to keep her marriage a secret from her mother—of the help my present of one hundred pounds had been to her, and of her many situations in France.

"I know I made you rather cross, dear auntie, and Prudence, when I ran away from my wedding day, a week ago, and I know that I deserved that you should be very angry. But you see I couldn't possibly marry Cyril Dare, now could I?"

"Why?" I asked, "was the child the hindrance?"

"The child? Why, auntie dear, what a stupid question. When I found that my dear husband was alive and on his way home I——"

"What!" I interrupted. "Alive! Rex Davidson alive!"

She got up, kissed us both again and slipped back to her seat on the edge of the bed.

"Didn't I say that his letter was put into my hand, when I was in my wedding dress waiting for my carriage. What could I do but run away? Poor Rex had written to me many a time—we rather suspect his letters were withheld."

A handful of gravel rattled on the window pane.

"That's my dear old hubbie," cried Betty, "tired of waiting at your hospitable door," and the girl rushed away with Darling in her arms to open it. We followed.

"God bless you, aunt Elizabeth," said Rex when I bade him welcome. He stooped and kissed my wrinkled cheek, then he shook hands with Prudence—who was wiping her eyes—and after that we were all at home and comfortable.

The lamps were relit and in less than a quarter of an hour a feast was prepared. The house was filled with gladness. Rex had still an ugly scam across his face but it was wonderful how much he had improved in appearance since last I saw him.

Dearie me, what the doctors are able to do in these days!

Rex himself was not altered a bit. He was thoroughly convinced that he was the husband of the dearest of girls and that the little daughter nestling in his arms was beyond compare.

They unfolded to me their plans.

Rex had obtained a good appointment as manager of some coalpits at Hebburn, and I was to let Briar-rose Cottage and make my home with Betty, taking Prudence with me.

The truth is my old heart clung so closely to them all that I could not again face a life of loneliness.

The next day I wrote to Maria and told her everything.

A few days afterwards her answer came, and with it a bundle of unopened letters addressed to Mrs. Rex Davidson.

"I wash my hands of Betty," she wrote, "the girl is a fool!"

"She is indeed," said Rex, proudly folding his wife in a close embrace. "A sweet little fool!"

B. Leicester.

An Ingenious Parent.

How a Father Saved the Expenses of a Wedding.

A young man who had long and dearly loved a beautiful girl, besought of her recently to name the happy day, which she did, with such shy, fond, reluctant delay that it would hardly have been thought she had made up her mind when the date was to be more than two months before.

They accordingly waited upon her immediate ancestor on the male side, and besought his blessing. He was a practical and economical old gentleman, with a mind fertile of resource, and when the young man had stammered that he loved her more dearly than his life, and had a salary of £350, and that he hoped—the old man caught up his trusty walking-stick and, calling his prospective son-in-law all sorts of names, drove him out of the house; then he bore his daughter off to the attic and locked her in there.

What is the consequence? The next morning the young man came with a rope-ladder, an ample cloak, and a marriage license, and stole his bride away, and they were made one at 8.30. Then the young wife said to her husband:

"Algernon, my father behaved very badly to you. Still, he was my mother's husband, and we ought to have some deference for him; so let us go to him and tell him we are wedded, and ask for that blessing. Besides, I want to get my brush and comb bag that I left on the dressing-table."

"Well, I'll go," said the young husband, "but, mind you, Matilda, if he lays a hand on me, save in the way of kindness, I'll knock his two eyes into one. I suffered his previous indignities because he was the hoary-headed author of your being, but now he is only my bald-headed father-in-law, and I won't stand it, if he is three times as old as I am."

Accordingly they went home, and when they got there and were excitedly feeling for the bell-pull, the old gentleman opened the door, and said:

"Come in, come in; how's the blushing bride, eh? Bless you, my children. Now, by the time you have partaken of a bottle of champagne the cab will be here to convey you to any railway station you may be pleased to indicate."

They followed the old gentleman into the parlour like people in a dream.

"I was afraid once," he said cheerfully, "when I saw Matilda coming down that ladder that the thing would break—for she's fully sixteen ounces to the pound, Matilda is—and drive all my new rose bushes and tulips into the ground. Why on earth didn't you, when you were compelled to flee from my wrath, elope out of the front door like Christians? I left Matilda's dungeon cell unlocked, and I left the front door ajar, and I went to the foot of the stairs and snored at the top of my voice so as to give you every facility."

"Do you mean to say, venerable and respected sir, that you have and have had no objections to my paying my addresses to your daughter?"

"Never in the least," replied the old man, beaming mildly on them; "you are the son-in-law I should have picked out of millions if I had been permitted to choose, and even if I had not been satisfied of your worth and sobriety, I could not have found it in my heart to refuse to do what Matilda desired me to do."

"Then, sir," exclaimed the young husband, thinking that he had married into a family having the hereditary taint of insanity in the blood, "why did you turn me out of the house in such an energetic and inconsistent manner?"

"Because, my dear boy," said the good old man, "I saw that you would instantaneously take out a license and elope with the girl and get married at an expense of two sovereigns, borne exclusively by you, whereas, if the marriage took place in the ordinary course of events, I would have been let in for a trousseau, and dresses, and flowers, and a wedding breakfast, and, on the top of all that, presents to the extent of about £30."

Percy Wixon.

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ROGER AND I.

A Story of Jealousy and a Lucky Find in a Book.

It is a very simple story. My name is Marian Ray, and I was twenty years old when I first met Roger Dermott at Poole, in Dorsetshire, where I was passing the summer.

We—my mother and I, who composed our entire family circle—had strayed to this quiet place because we knew that her lease of life was not for very long, and I grasped at any suggestion of possible relief to her, even as the drowning catch at straws, forgetting how frail they are. And it was terrible to me to think that I must be left alone in the great, wide world—alone and poor.

We were always together—my mother and I—for she was more like an elder sister than a parent, and we clung the closer now, for we felt that the time was short.

Therefore, I made her life as pleasant and easy as possible, and her only anxiety was for my lonely, unprotected future, when we must leave her out under the flowers and the dew, and I would be friendless.

But I, feeling very brave and confident, as the young are prone to do, smiled back courageously into her face, and at last, when my future began to be discussed, changed the subject of conversation.

And so we lived on at the sea-side, and our two lives were very grey and uneventful, until the time came when a ray of sunshine slipped in; but, ah! when the sunshine goes again, I notice it is always darker than before it came.

We were strolling along the beach one divine June morning, my arm round my mother, in a tender, protecting way, when she suddenly started from my side, advanced a few steps, and with a flush upon her pale face, held out her hand in a cordial greeting.

Glancing up in surprise, I met the laughing brown eyes of Roger Dermott. He saluted me with a courteous bow, insisted upon taking my place beside mother, and together we resumed our morning walk.

That was the beginning of many pleasant days. Days no longer lonely, for he was ever with us; no longer now was my heart filled with gloomy forebodings for the future, for Roger and I were betrothed.

It is wonderful what great strides hearts will make towards each other when isolated from society and surrounded by the wealth which dear Mother Nature loves to lavish upon her children.

Looking back upon that past, after the laspe of years,

"*I think my eyes grow wet, as somewhere within my breast*
Stabbed a faint and slothful pang never wholly laid at rest."

Somehow, that secluded spot has ever been to me as the grave-yard in which all I ever loved lies sleeping; and yet, there is no dust there to which I have a claim. There are grave-yards in the memory sometimes, and there it seems to me we always lay our bravest and best.

Roger was a sailor, and it was strange how soon I learnt to take an interest in all that pertained to the ocean. We passed hours by the salt sea waves, while he unfolded to me the mysteries that lay hidden in its shining, deceitful depths.

I loved the sea then; oh, how I loved it! But now, when I walk along the beach, it talks to me of partings, and all dreary things, and the sound of its tumultuous roaring comes to my ears like the cries of a soul in despair.

One gloomy afternoon in September, with the sky threatening and dreary, and the sun red and sullen, sinking in a crimson ball behind the mass of clouds lowering in the west, I walked upon the rocks beside the sea. Roger was to meet me there—for he was to sail on the morrow for the Indies, leaving me, with a heart like a lump of lead, to await his return.

I could not endure the thought of this parting. But he would be captain of the vessel when he came back, he said, and he must not lose this chance in the world.

He would have taken me with him as his wife, but there was mother, too frail to undertake the journey, and so I would stay behind. But no matter how much is to be gained by the voyage, there never was a woman yet that could feel, at such a time, the value of any gain; and I suppose I was like the rest.

And so I paced up and down the rocks in the sunset, with my heart all choked-like, and my voice full of tears. But my eyes were dry—quite dry—for Roger must not see my weakness. When he was gone there would be days and nights to cry in, and then my tears need not be restrained.

So, waiting bravely for his coming, I watched the offing, where the ships rocked lazily, to and fro, with the rising wind. The surf lines came booming up at the foot of the rocks, frothing and foaming angrily; the gulls circled above my head, shrieking and dipping into the white-capped waves. And then, watching the sun go down, I began to wonder at Roger's delay.

We had walked upon the beach every pleasant evening, but never before had I waited his coming at this spot. And I thought how pleased he would be to find me so much nearer than he anticipated.

I smiled to myself as I marked at last his familiar form moving along the beach. But—where was he going? He directed his steps to a little nook or cove on the shore, which I had never visited, for he had warned me of its danger when the tide was in.

As he entered the sheltered nook, I perceived that the place was occupied, for there was the gleam of a gay dress, and then I saw a slender form.

It was Milly Dean, the daughter of a fisherman, living near, and my heart gave a great, angry bound, as I saw that Roger evidently expected her.

I saw her turn to meet him, and flinging back her long, dark hair from her pretty face, she seized his hands with a passionate gesture.

But I waited to see no more. Down from the rock I dashed, and turned towards home. Then, I composed myself, and walking quietly to the hotel, I sought my own apartments. My mother—gentle soul—attributing my agitation to Roger, tried to soothe me and I was too heart-sick to explain.

In a short time I heard his voice asking the servant if we were engaged, and regardless of consequences, I sent down word that I was too ill to see him, on that, the last evening we were to be together!

The next morning, before the ship sailed, I wrote a line to Mr. Roger Dermott, and returning a book which I had found awaiting me, I told him that he was free; our engagement

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was at an end. And, with quiet scorn, I warned him not to write to me, for if he did, I would burn his letters unopened. And Roger Dermott knew that I never broke my word. I slipped his ring into the envelope, and so, it was all over.

After that, we returned to our home in London; and there the fever seized me. I went down to the gates of death, but my feet were stayed at the portals; so I came back to life, with its duties and stern realities.

One blow followed another in quick succession. Hardly had I regained my strength, when my mother set forth upon that last lonely journey that we all must take alone. With her dear hand in mine, I watched her as she "fell in sleep." She died unconscious of what had come between Roger and me, and our two names were the last upon her lips. Died! And we, who had always been together, were parted forever now!

I stood alone in the world now. God help the poor woman who has that to say of herself, and with a woman's precarious chances of earning an honest livelihood.

I was fortunate in finding a friend, and just at the blackest hour of my night (the hour before the day-dawn), just when my heart had failed me, and desolate and alone I felt "hedged in" by all the pitiless world, a kind hand was stretched out to save me from despair.

An old-time friend of my father offered me the charge of a circulating library, and too thankful for words, I wrung his hand in gratitude, and turned my face in the direction of my work.

It was the beginning of winter, and glad was I of the employment which would secure me from want during that inclement season, and I was ready for the hardest and most irksome task.

Mr. Lee, my employer, was a genial old gentleman, a perfect "book-worm," and I soon found my labours engrossing. Among books I could not be very lonely; and so the days wore away, and at last I grew quietly happy.

Some three years had elapsed since my mother's death, when one day, going into an unused room, I stumbled over a small wooden box.

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mr. Lee, "if there isn't that box of second-hand books I purchased a fortnight ago! They comprise some valuable works, and are worth something!"

So saying, he removed the lid from the box. I assisted him in assorting the contents. Almost the first volume I touched was a copy of Longfellow's poems, with Roger Dermott's name on the fly-leaf. Well did I remember the book—which he had sent me the day before he had sailed for the Indies.

As I opened it, a folded paper fluttered from between the leaves to the floor. It was a letter addressed to me in Roger's well-remembered hand. Trembling like a leaf, I read these words:

"Darling Marian,—*Forgive me if I do not come as early as usual to-night. Little Milly Dean has begged me to do her a favour. The poor girl has a lover, an honest, steady fellow, but her father, who is a hard-hearted old man, is opposed to the marriage; and, as I have some influence with him, I have consented to try to induce him to consent. I send this note, darling, with the copy of Longfellow that I promised you. Please await patiently the coming of your* Roger."

The Spring sunlight stole into the little room where I sat, staring my own mad folly in the face. Bowing my head upon my clasped hands, I wept tears of bitter grief. So, we were separated for ever, and I, in my mad blindness, had done it all.

Two weeks later, I came back to the old home by the sea. Almost the first person I met was Roger Dermott, who had just returned from his voyage. I went swiftly up to him, and sturdily trampling my pride under foot, in a low, trembling voice, I told him the whole story, and begged him to forgive me.

Standing there in the sunset, with the waters of the old ocean at our feet, Roger took my hand in his.

"Darling," he said softly, "of course you are forgiven. Be my wife at once, and never doubt me again, Marian, never while you live!"

And standing there together, a happy faith and trust crept into our hearts—never to go away again—never any more.

E. B. Collins.

Your Editor Chats.

The Buried Stations Competition is now being checked and the result will be announced as soon as possible.

On page 15 you will find another list of letters in the Juggled Letters Competition. This competition will be complete in twelve lists.

The cover this week consists of a reproduction of the Clan Macfie Tartan, which will appeal especially to Scottish readers, though I am sure that readers of English and other nationalities will also appreciate it. Nine other Scottish tartans have appeared at various times previously; a list of them, together with the dates of their appearance, will be found on page 20.

I wonder whether any of my readers ever think of posting on to a friend their copy of *Short Stories* when they have finished with it? Such an action would be much appreciated by both the friend and myself. The friend would enjoy the perusal of the little paper, and very likely might wish to become a subscriber, which would be a benefit to me and also to yourself, as every fresh subscriber means that I can spend more on the production of the paper, and thus you will get a better paper for your penny than you do at present. I shall be glad to hear from readers what they do with their copies of *Short Stories* after they have no further use for them.

We are getting near the time of year now when the towns become oppressively hot. The sun seems to scorch up whatever little vegetation there is, and the narrow streets and alleys become almost unbearable. It is at such a time as this that those town-dwellers who are able arrange to go away to the seaside or country to escape from some of the heat.

Now there are many town-dwellers who cannot afford to go away even for a day. Adults, of course, can stand the summer heat very well, but the children are not yet acclimatised, and it is for them that the Fresh Air Fund appeals. Ninepence pays for a Whole Day's Outing for one child. That isn't a very big sum, is it? If you save threepence a week for three weeks you will have it; then what you should do is:—Procure ten stamps; put nine inside an envelope, together with your name and address; then address the envelope to the Hon. Sec., Fresh Air Fund, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C., affix the tenth stamp to it, and place in the nearest post-box.

Of course, if you can spare more than ninepence, so much the better; the larger the sum the more children will be able to go away. All amounts will be acknowledged in *Pearson's Weekly*. The Hon. Sec. will send collecting forms on application.

Your Editor.

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A DECEITFUL WOMAN.

The Story of how Love Made Amends.

The festivities were in full swing at the charming little villa of the Honourable Mrs. Norton, the rooms were crowded to excess, the floor perfect, and the champagne all that it should be, the girls charming—the pick of the season's beauties always found their way to little Mrs. Norton's informal dances; and last, but by no means least, the larger proportion of the men were first-rate waltzers.

Through the long French windows—which opened on to a lawn sloping to the river-side—one or two couples had found their way into the cool, sweet-scented garden, gay with Chinese lanterns, the lights on the river gleaming softly through the evening haze, while the low murmur of the water formed an accompaniment to sweet voices and more manly tones.

"They look like business, don't they?" said pretty little Lady Vi to her husband, glancing towards a pair of tall figures. "I wonder if he'll propose to-night—what do you say?"

"Given a sufficiently pretty woman, a more or less romantic spot, and there's no knowing how great a fool a man will make of himself, especially after supper, and when the champagne is as good as Pollie Norton's. The girl's not bad-looking, is she Vi?" he added, pointing to the tall, straight figure of a woman, evidently too engrossed with her companion—a dark, eager-looking man, with the unmistakable carriage of a soldier—to pay any attention to the notes and comments of the bystanders.

"For my taste I think Angela Carlisle too tall and big—altogether too much in evidence," said Lady Vi, who was a sparkling little brunette. "It is funny what so charming a man as Douglas Lyle can see in her. By-the-bye, I never rightly understood who or what Angela was. Did Mrs. Norton ever tell you where she picked up her *protégée*, Lionel?"

"Cousin, I believe," he returned laconically. "I heard something about her being an heiress; anyway, she's a beauty, and Pollie Norton is not the woman to 'take up' an angel without evidence of her occupying a decent position in celestial society. Come, Vi, it's too damp for anything out here: let's go indoors."

The two figures at the bottom of the garden, apparently impervious to damp, continued to gaze upon the river—the silvery Thames, that has seen innumerable lovers come and go.

"The water sounds dreary to-night," said Angela dreamily. "It always has a peculiar fascination for me; it seems so exactly to give voice to everything one feels."

"But you don't want to voice anything dreary, Angela? You are the very incarnation of life and laughter!"

"Not always," she answered, in a low voice.

He turned towards her quickly.

"Something is troubling you, Angela; you are not like yourself to-night. I have so counted on this evening, dear; so longed for the opportunity to tell you that which already you must have guessed, and now, when at last I have you to myself, I find you changed, cold, almost constrained."

"Not changed," she said, "but——"

He interrupted her.

"What is it, Angela, that has lately come between us? You know, you must know, how dearly, how fondly, I love you. I had thought you were not altogether indifferent to that love, though you have so often, so cruelly denied me the chance of telling it. Put an end to my suspense, Angela. Answer me one way or the other. Tell me here and now, will you accept my love, my name, become my wife?"

The mist was rising from the river, hovering about them like a soft white cloud and shutting out the lights, the sound of the music, the soft laughter, and gay voices; they two seemed in a world apart.

The girl stretched out her arms towards the river. Her face, raised to the cold white moon, looked pale and wan. She stood silent for a moment, and then, with a quiet gesture, she laid her hand in his.

"Yes," she said, "I will be your wife." But even as she answered him she felt a thrill akin to fear run through her; he was so strong, so determined, so masterful even in his love, that it seemed impossible that he could ever be tolerant of weakness, of indecision; and yet he loved her very much, and she saw his eyes light up with passion, while his strong arms trembled as he held her close, and his voice sounded strangely tender, gentle beyond belief.

"You shall never regret your choice, my darling!" he whispered. "You shall have all my thoughts, all my devotion, all my love!"

"But your people, Douglas?" she asked, after a while. "Will they be willing to receive me? You know, dear, I am not your equal in wealth, though I have a fair income—£2,000 a year at the least—and——"

"Do you suppose it matters to me whether or not you have a penny, Angela?" he interrupted hastily. Her words jarred upon him; it seemed so incongruous to mention her income in the middle of a conversation of such vital importance.

"I thought I should like you to know," she said almost humbly; "things get so exaggerated, and Pollie Norton is always fond of drawing the long bow; besides, I have heard so much about your people's particularity—how do you know your mother will like me, Douglas?"

"My darling, how could my mother help liking you? She is as ardent a worshipper of beauty as I am; the only stipulation she ever made with regard to my wife was when she laughingly told me to be sure to choose 'a beauty and a lady.' Imagine my being attracted by anyone else?"

"What do you call 'a lady,' Douglas?"

"My dearest Angela, I beg of you do not propound any more conundrums. Those pretty lips were never meant to tantalise your lover in so cruel a fashion. I will answer all your questions, sweetheart, with a kiss," and, stooping a little, he held up the winsome face and pressed her lips—not once, but twenty times.

"My own, tell me you love me?" he demanded, in his masterful sort of fashion; but she broke from him, and, with a little laugh, disappeared through the mist. He followed, somewhat perplexed.

Douglas Lyle, soldier as he was, strong-willed and stronger-hearted, was all too simple-minded to understand the manifold perversities with which a woman encompasses her love, and Angela's varying moods puzzled while they enchanted him. But as he stood in the porch, smoking a cigarette rather disconsolately, a pair of arms wound themselves round his neck, soft, clinging lips were laid on his, and a low voice whispered: "Douglas, I love you!" Then before he had time to seize and hold her, Angela had vanished.

The news of their engagement leaked out somehow, as engagements always do, and many were the covert allusions,

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sly smiles, and pretty speeches directed to the young couple for the rest of the evening. It seemed to Angela as if it would never come to an end, and when the last "good-bye" had been said, and the last carriage rolled away, she felt hardly able to keep up any longer.

Later the two—Pollie Norton, as her intimates called the widow, and Angela Carlisle—stood facing each other in the pretty little room, half library, half boudoir, which did duty for the latter's private sitting-room in the riverside cottage. Now they were left alone a strange sort of stiffness seemed to fall between them, quite different from the easy relationship of hostess and girl friend.

"Captain Lyle proposed to me to-night," said Angela coldly, staring straight before her into the glass above the mantelpiece.

"I suppose you accepted him?" queried the little widow.

"Yes," replied the girl.

"Well, you are to be congratulated. Douglas will come in for a title at his uncle's death and a rent-roll of about £10,000 a year, besides his own property, which brings him in quite another fifteen."

Angela nodded, but vouchsafed no further information. The elder woman looked at her somewhat curiously—a tall, straight figure with curling chestnut hair, clear, pale skin, and large, mournful-looking, velvety-brown eyes. Then, somewhat irritated at her silence, she spoke again.

"You're playing rather a dangerous game," she said. "Douglas is as proud as Lucifer, and his mother is a good deal worse. Once let him discover that he's been deceived, and all the marriage ceremonies in the world won't keep him by you. It's your own business, of course, but, as I say, it's very risky!"

"It is more than likely I shall tell him all the truth," replied Angela.

"You appear to have forgotten our arrangement," said Mrs. Norton spitefully; "I, on my side, undertook to do certain things for you, for a consideration; you, on your part, gave me an understanding to the effect that you would not reveal the terms of our engagement, at any rate while you remained with me, and I presume you wish the marriage to take place from here?"

"Yes, if you have no objection."

"None at all, provided you keep to the agreement until after the event."

"I will remember," said the girl, with a heavy sigh. "I think I'll go to bed now—if you don't mind," she added; and, with a ceremonious sort of greeting, the two parted, Angela to read a letter which, directed in a neat and clear hand-writing to "Miss Angela Carlisle," contained another in an unbroken envelope, addressed, in coarsely-formed letters, to:

"Mrs. Carlisle Smith,
Care of Messrs. Martin and Harvey,
Furnival's Inn,"

a letter which caused her, judging by the tears in her eyes, much vexation of spirit; while Pollie Norton sat wrinkling her pretty brows far into the night over a collection of bills. Apparently, however, she came to a satisfactory conclusion concerning them.

"Thank goodness!" she ejaculated fervently, "the wedding will put me straight. I shall ask her for a cheque for £1,000—and cheap at the price, I call it. Anyway, Angela's not mean!" with which comforting reflection the little widow blew out the candle and fell asleep.

The London season was coming to a close. Most of the "smart set" had already left town; those who were still detained, feeling called upon to apologise for their presence, discussed the fashionable engagements which always form such an engrossing topic of conversation at the fag-end of the season's gaieties, none being more spoken of than Angela Carlisle's. She was alternately described as "simply lovely," "horribly made-up," and—the most delicate flattery of all, from a woman's lips—"rather nice-looking," for when was there ever yet a beauty who was not so designated by her "dearest friends"? Indeed, her approaching marriage with Douglas Lyle formed a nine days' wonder. "What can he see in her?" "Very designing girl, I fear," were among the least unfavourable of Society's comments; while the fact that the wedding was to be very quiet did much to increase its unpopularity.

It was Angela's special request that they should be married without any fuss, and the arrangement coincided exactly with Douglas' views on the matter. Mrs. Norton contented herself with a few sarcastic speeches relative to the habits of the ostrich; some people, as she averred, being like that remarkable bird, inasmuch as they imagined it possible to deceive Society as to their intentions by doing things "on the quiet." Having so far relieved her mind, she devoted her energies to Angela's trousseau, displaying, in fact, a great deal more interest in the matter than the girl herself.

The lovers had been one afternoon to visit Mrs. Lyle, a charming but somewhat formidable old lady, almost too devoted to her son, whom she was convinced no woman could fully appreciate, "her dear boy's" manifold perfections rendering it impossible.

The visit had not been an unqualified success. Angela felt she was being "appraised," and did not improve under the process, while Douglas, seeing that they did not "hit it off," made matters worse by well-meant but somewhat clumsy efforts at creating a diversion.

"I feel sure I have seen you before, Miss Carlisle," said Mrs. Lyle's companion, a person chiefly remarkable for an unpleasantly retentive memory, and an unfortunate knack of recounting her various recollections at singularly inopportune moments.

"Now I come to think of it, it was at the flower-show at Petersham; you looked so *very* sweet, I remember. Don't you recollect it?"

"Hardly," said Angela coolly, "considering I was never there."

Now, as a matter of fact, the companion was perfectly correct, but Angela's answer was accompanied by such a contemptuous, not to say scowling glance in her direction, that the poor little woman collapsed, and muttering something about "most marked resemblance," subsided for the remainder of the afternoon.

But the incident prevented any further friendly intercourse; and Angela rose at last to bring her unpleasant quarter of an hour to an end.

"Good-bye, my dear," said her hostess. "I shall hope to find in you a daughter, and you must look upon me in the place of your own mother; poor child, it is very sad for you to have lost her so young!"

The old lady's voice was kindly, and she looked at Angela with genuine affection in her keen grey eyes, but the girl did not respond as was her wont to the show of sympathy. Indeed, she was almost repellent in her manner, and effectually checked any further advances on the part of the elder woman.

She was singularly quiet, almost absent, all the way home, and when at last they reached the little villa Douglas ventured on a slight reproach.

"Angela," he said, "I wish you could make up your mind to like my mother. She is quite prepared to be proud and fond of you."

"I always told you that your people would prove the stumbling-block, Douglas," she answered, "but if I have behaved in any way contrary to your wish towards her, I am sorry."

Her voice sounded very tired, and her eyes were fixed and sad.

"Forgive me, darling. I was a brute to say anything to annoy you! Kiss me Angela, and say that you for give me?"

"Do you really love me.

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Douglas? I mean, is it for myself? Would you care for me if you were suddenly to learn that—that I was Jane Smith, for instance, of plebeian family instead of——"

"You are a goose, dear!" he laughed. "You don't suppose I love you because your name is Angela? I should be as capable of affection if you were Jane; but it's rather a useless sort of imagining, isn't it, dear? No one could picture you as a member of a plebeian family."

She murmured some unintelligible answer, and, pleading a headache, left her lover somewhat abruptly. Throwing herself upon her bed, she hid her face, and her form shook with convulsive sobs. Whatever it might be that Angela Carlisle was hiding from her lover, she was paying a high price for the deceit.

* * * * *

Early the next morning Douglas Lyle called to see his beloved. She was not at home, the housemaid informed him, considerably to his astonishment, and had not left word when she might be expected.

Douglas was troubled at the intelligence and not a little mystified. That Angela should break an appointment he had made was an unheard of thing, and he had arranged that morning to call for her a little after ten.

Twice in the course of the day he returned, each time to receive the same answer, "Not at home."

And all the time Angela was upstairs in her room, listening with aching heart to her lover's voice.

"I can't see him, I daren't see him!" she cried. "I am afraid—afraid——" She walked impatiently to and fro, her eyes feverishly bright, her small hands clenched convulsively. At last towards the evening she grew calmer, and, sitting down, wrote a note to Douglas, asking him to come round then and there and wait for her in the garden.

"I have much, so much, to tell you!" she wrote. "Come, for this last time, come to me!"

Considering that she had denied herself three times that day to Mr. Lyle, this proceeding seemed a strange one; indeed, the neat little parlourmaid whom Angela dispatched with the note thought the young lady must be a little mad.

Douglas arrived almost as soon as the maid. He made his way down the garden path, and there, overlooking the river, in the very spot where Angela had promised to become his wife, he found her, with eyes dull from weeping, her proud head drooping, her face pale and haggard. She looked strangely unlike his fair, proud Angela.

"Dearest," he said softly, laying his hand upon her shoulder, "what is troubling you?"

"Don't speak to me or touch me till I've told you all!" she said. "You cannot guess what it is I have to say to you."

"Wait a moment, Angela," he said quietly. "If there is anything that you would rather not tell me I am quite prepared to promise forgiveness without confession on your part. I trust you so implicitly, dear, that I leave you the choice absolutely."

"I must tell you, Douglas. I could not marry you unless you knew. And yet it is so hard—so hard—to tell!"

And then, with many a pause, in a voice broken with sobs, she told him all. How, as a young orphan, and a considerable heiress, she had been left to the care of an old friend of her father's of the name of Smith, a man of considerable scientific attainments, but in the ordinary affairs of life as simple as a child. His wife had died at the birth of his son, who had grown up a good-looking prodigal, a disappointment to his father, and all else beside.

Her guardian, dreading the responsibilities attaching to the care of a young girl, married his housekeeper—a kind-hearted, loving woman, who in spite of her want of education took the place of a mother to poor Angela.

"When I was but nineteen," said Angela, "my guardian died and left me to the care of his wife, the woman whom I call 'mother,' and who has been loving and tender as ever a mother could be. But she is not—not like the people you are used to, Douglas. She is unlettered, uneducated, but——" she paused. "I can't give her up," she said, "even for you!"

In the dim light she cast a glance at her lover. His face was turned from her. She seemed to read the stern, set look in his eyes, the contempt with which he heard the tale. A great fear clutched at her heart; for a minute she was tempted to end the story there.

There was another chapter, but he would never know, unless she told him. He might forgive her for loving this poor, ignorant woman who had so loved her. But the rest of the story.

Clenching her hands Angela forced herself to speak.

"Before my guardian died," she went on, "he warned me against his son Carlisle. He was not a good man. Guardian saw he was attracted to me, and feared I cared for him. His warning was all too late. I had married Carlisle secretly a year before."

She glanced piteously at Douglas as she spoke; but he made no sign.

"After my guardian's death I went with 'mother,' as I called her, to the village of Petersham, where I took my rightful name—Mrs. Carlisle Smith, though I had not seen nor heard of my husband—husband in name only—since the marriage. I sorrowed for him, Douglas. I was but a young girl, and he had seemed all that a girl could wish. But, as time went on, I thought less of him; I grew bitter towards him, and when at last the news reached me that he had been killed in a street fight out in San Francisco, I felt no grief. I welcomed my freedom. I could not bear to retain any trace of my foolish marriage, so I dropped the name of Smith and called myself Miss Carlisle. And then I determined to destroy all connection with my old life. I arranged with Mrs. Norton—a distant cousin of my mother—to launch me into Society—she knowing my story. I even kept my whereabouts from the woman whom I loved so dearly, for fear people should find out my past through her. Then I met you, Douglas, and at first I meant never to tell you; but I've learnt to love you so dearly that I could not bear to deceive you, and now—now you will cast me off."

With streaming eyes and outstretched hands she turned towards him to receive her sentence. She had deceived him. It was just she should be punished. Yet——

With a swift movement he put his arms about her.

"Angela, have you so little faith in me? Now that I have heard your story, I shall ask you once again to be my wife. Dearest, it isn't new to me. I knew it all along. My mother's companion wasn't the only person who saw you at Petersham. I was there, too, and straightway fell in love with you. I learnt your history from Mrs. Smith; had I not pledged her to secrecy she would have told you."

"Why did you want to keep it from me?"

"I hoped that you would tell me yourself, Angela. I waited sometimes impatiently for you to give me your confidence, but at last, at least, my patience is requited."

"And you can care for me, Douglas, in spite of my deceit?"

His answer was inaudible, but apparently satisfactory, for Angela straightway threw her arms round his neck, and in a voice thrilling with happiness, cried:

"I am a wretched and deceitful woman, Douglas. But I love you so—I love you so, perhaps 'twill make amends."

And apparently it did.

John K. Prothero.

"My face is my fortune, sir," she said. "That's plain enough," he replied abstractedly. Then it took him three hours to explain.

"There is one thing that I must say for Blowhard and that trombone of his." "What's that?" "He has driven all the cats into another neighbourhood to do their serenading."

Some time ago a worthy farmer and his wife had a visit from their minister, who was asked to stop to tea. Their servant, Mary, who is a Highland lass, had newly come from that locality, and her mistress put her in charge of getting the bread-and-butter ready for tea. Mary, thinking the minister's visit was of unusual importance, came and whispered in the guidwife's ear: "Will I butter the bread on baith sides?"

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Supporting a Theory.

Telling of why a Girl was a Flirt.

THE house-party at Westwood were dawdling over their coffee on the moonlit verandah.

It was a merry crowd; everybody knew everybody else, and there was much laughter and talk, but suddenly a silence fell. Then it became patent to all that the couple seated on the steps leading to the lawn were engaged in a quiet but bitter altercation.

The girl's listless air was in striking contrast to the man's eagerness.

"Your idea is an absurd one," he exclaimed.

"Oh fie!" she said, "to speak so rudely to a woman."

"It is not rudeness, but truth."

"Then they are apparently synonymous."

"I can't help it; it exasperates me to hear an intelligent girl like you——"

"Now, where," she broke in, "did you pick that up? I am not the least bit intelligent! If I were I would know better than to argue with you; it is so perfectly hopeless"—sighing—"and you do get so excited."

"And who wouldn't? Listening to such impossible theories!"

"You don't have to! I never asked you to talk to me. I came out here to be by myself, and you deliberately followed me. Why didn't you stay with the others? They are all pleasanter than I am."

"Humility," he said, "is a cloak that fits badly on your shoulders."

"My sleeves are too large, perhaps! But really you misunderstand—I have an excellent opinion of myself. I can be quite agreeable, when I choose, but I am not in the mood to-night."

"Then according to your theory you ought to be most attractive."

"What is your theory, Kate?" called her cousin.

"One you have heard me express thousands of times before."

"Shall I tell him, Miss Danbury?"

"Certainly."

"She says that a man doesn't like to feel too confident of a woman's affection; that it is the element of uncertainty in love affairs that makes them interesting; that he enjoys being puzzled and played with, and that a clever woman has only to appear indifferent to first pique and then attract him."

"Heresy!" exclaimed a chorus of manly voices.

"Mr. Stewart has omitted an important clause," said Miss Danbury. "I add that to do this the woman must necessarily be good to look at and not lacking in this world's goods."

"Oh Kate, Kate" sighed her cousin, "would you insinuate that the masculine fancy is influenced by worldly advantages?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have stated my case; you can make it what you choose."

The hostess, who had been listening idly, now put in a word:

"The trouble with you all is that you analyse too much," she said. "Why not take things as they come, without worrying over their possible causes? It is so much more simple and healthy."

Miss Danbury turned round.

"Isn't Madge charming?" she said amiably. "To hear her you would suppose that she had never seen the inside of a drawing-room. She always gets like that when she comes to the country; something in the air, probably."

"And you?" said Stewart, when the laughter following her speech had died away; "has it no effect on you?"

"The country? Oh, yes, it makes me—if that is possible—more indolent than usual," and she leant her head against the pillar and looked not at him, but past him to the stretch of rosy sky.

"What an actress you are!" he said; "you are not the least bit indifferent really, but it has amused you to pose as such so long that now it has almost become second nature."

"To pose as anything involves a certain amount of personal exertion."

"Well, doubtless you find it worth while if your audience is appreciative; and it usually is, I fancy."

"Have you noticed those two clouds?" she said. "It is curious to watch how they keep floating first towards and then away from each other, like people who are playing at cross purposes."

"You were evidently not listening to a word I was saying."

"Oh, yes, I was. You were scolding me, but you generally are, you know, and you said something about my posing. You have told me that often before, and so——"

"And so—apparently there was no need for listening to me. I had no idea I was such a bore."

She looked at him, saying:

"Now, you see, you are angry again! Don't you think," leaning towards him confidentially, "you ought to do something for your temper? It may get you into trouble some day. Not everybody is as amiable as I?"

"Still wrangling?" asked Carl Ainslie, lounging down the steps. "My dear young friends, it grieves me to the heart to see such a display of unchristian feeling. 'Let dogs delight to bark and bite.'"

"Blame Mr. Stewart and not me," said the girl; "you know, Carl, that I haven't the energy to quarrel with any one, especially in this weather."

"Of course not. Miss Danbury only says the things that make other people want to quarrel."

"A charming character you have given me; after that, I think I will abandon the field to you. Come, Carl," with a quick change of manner, "let's go down to the lake for a row."

Stewart watched them with wrath in his heart—the girl was talking gaily, her soft laugh floating back to him.

"There goes a living denial of her theory," he thought. "She is kindness itself to Ainslie and he is devoted to her. Indifference, indeed! I'd like to see the woman who could attract me by that. As for Miss Danbury, she is a heartless little flirt, and I don't intend to fret myself about her," and he climbed the steps and stalked gloomily off to the smoking-room.

"Kate," said young Ainslie, resting on his oars, "I'm your cousin and have a right to tell you when I think you are doing wrong; so I say—do leave poor old Stewart alone."

"Leave poor old Stewart alone!" indignantly. "I think you had better suggest his leaving me alone."

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"Of course, now, you know very well what I mean. It's all right for you to trample on Herbert and Reade and myself, we're used to it—been broken in too long to protest—but Stewart's another sort; he cares awfully about things."

"Oh, indeed, so he 'cares awfully,' and the rest of you, I suppose, are only amusing yourselves."

"How you tease a fellow! No—what I mean is that he is so terribly 'all there,' don't you know, that if he lets himself be hard hit it would knock him out completely to have you throw him over."

"So terribly 'all there'—what a graphic expression. Yet undeniably true in this case; but why do you take it for granted that I will throw him over?"

Mr. Ainslie's face expressed the utmost consternation.

"Well, really, I don't know, but I thought, I somehow concluded——"

"What?"

"Why," a brilliant idea striking him, "that you didn't care for anybody, and wouldn't until you had seen more of the world, for you are very young, Kate, in spite of your many experiences."

"Carl," said Miss Danbury solemnly, "the Bar has lost a shining mark in you, but I am proud to claim you as a relative."

* * * * *

It was a fortnight later; the house party would disperse on the morrow, and Miss Danbury, to whom Westwood was dear, was taking a farewell stroll through the gardens. She was idling down a path, when, catching sight of Stewart over the tops of the rose bushes, she ostentatiously put up her parasol and turned in the other direction.

But he was not to be so easily thrown off; with a curl of the lip (for he had recognised the manœuvre) he hurried towards her.

"Miss Danbury!" he cried. "Will you spare me a few moments?"

She turned her head.

"I am not in a pleasant frame of mind. Uncle forwarded me my dressmaker's bill this morning, with certain pungent comments of his own appended, and my best manuscript has just been returned to me as 'unsuitable,' so the atmosphere is not rosy."

"Never mind about that. I will not detain you long," and he pulled up a chair.

For a few moments there was silence, for now that he had gained the coveted interview Stewart did not seem to know what to say, and Miss Danbury, with the point of her parasol, sketched triangles and circles and all sorts of impossible devices in the sandy path. While looking the picture of careless inattention, she was in reality curious to know how long her companion intended to continue staring in front of him. When he finally did speak his remark was so different from what she expected that she almost started.

"I suppose you know you are very beautiful," he said. "Doubtless your mirror has told you that already, so I need not weary you with repetitions, but I feel sure that you do not realise how absolutely charming you are."

She looked at him wonderingly; it was a favourite method of hers, and usually worked well, but now it failed to produce the effect she intended.

"Don't look like that," he said, "or I shall think you are not sincere, and I don't want to think that. I want to carry away the kindest thoughts of you."

"You have changed," she said. "Ten days ago you told Mary Fair I was thoroughly heartless."

"Did I? Well, that only shows I was a fool. I know you better now; and what is more, I understand you."

A slight pause.

"I heard up at the house that you were engaged to your cousin, and while the news could not but hurt me, it was in one sense a relief, for I knew at once why you had avoided and almost ignored me. You wanted to save me pain. Experience has taught me that if a man saw much of you he generally cared for you, and you tried to ward me off. But you cannot keep the moth from the candle, and I loved you in spite of your coldness. It almost looks as if there was something in your theory, doesn't it?"

Miss Danbury gathered herself together. Stewart did not know it, but she was summoning courage to tell him the truth about herself. She loved to be well thought of, and it was a genuine sacrifice to speak, but she could not, in common honesty, allow him to remain under his delusion.

"You must not think too well of me," she began.

"I could not," he cried. "One rarely sees so much youth and beauty and simple goodness united as I find in you."

Simple goodness! The words scorched her.

"You are all wrong," she cried, with burning cheeks. "I am not the least bit like that. Don't you see? Can't you understand? It vexed me to have you laugh at my theory, so I determined to make you an example of its truth. It was from no good motive—not to 'ward you off' or 'to save you pain,' but with the distinct intention of making you care for me, 'that I pretend to be indifferent.'"

Stewart got slowly to his feet.

"And so," he said, "in support of a theory, for the sake of proving yourself in the right, you could play havoc with a man's heart and make havoc of his life. Fool, fool that I was, not to understand!" and he struck one palm sharply against the other. "Well," with sarcastic courtesy, "the point is gained, the poor dupe at your feet. I hope you are content."

"Content!" she cried. "I was never so sorry in my life. It seems strange that I should care, doesn't it? And, as you say, I have gained my point—and yet——"

"Yes," he said, "and yet?"

Instead of replying she turned her head swiftly away, but not before he had seen that her eyes were full of tears. He stood irresolute, overcome by surprise; then he approached her.

"Don't cry like that," he said. "You never meant to hurt me; it was a pretty bit of acting to you, and if I was stupid and overdid my part you are not to blame. There, look up. What will your cousin say if he learns I distressed you?"

"What is it to me what my cousin thinks?"

Mr. Stewart stared.

"Pardon me, but I thought that being engaged to him—"

"I am not engaged to him. Nothing is further from my intention."

A silence followed. Then Miss Danbury rose to depart, but Stewart, whose mind had been adjusting itself to the changed situation, put out a detaining hand.

"Kate," he said, "if you are not going to marry your cousin, perhaps there might be a chance for someone else."

"Perhaps."

He drew nearer.

"I know I'm a perfect fool to rush on my fate, but what's worth having is certainly worth asking for. Kate, will you marry me?"

She smiled, but her eyes were very tender.

"I believe you do love me," she said.

"Well, a little."

"And if I marry you, I know I shall be happy. You are so strong and true, and have my confidence so utterly, but I have been horrid to you, so rude and disagreeable that I don't see how you can stand me."

"Why, you are going back on your theory."

"The girls will certainly laugh, and Carl will never leave me alone about it, but I don't care," lifting her face resolutely, "I love you, and there's no use pretending I don't."

A little while later she looked up.

"I always said I would never care for anybody," she remarked, "what will this prove?"

"That you are a woman," he said.

C. A. Ashborne.

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Letter Juggling Competition.

CASH DOWN. FIRST PRIZE, £25.	CASH DOWN. SECOND PRIZE, £10.	CASH DOWN. THIRD PRIZE, £5.

TWO BILLIARD TABLES *(measuring 4 ft. 10 inches by 2 ft. 8½ inches), together with cues, balls, marking board, and spirit level,*

And **TWENTY-FIVE GRAMOPHONES**, *each one fitted with a Concert Sound-Box, and accompanied by two records.*

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WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO.

Below you will find twelve sets of letters, each of which contains the name of a Railway Station in the United Kingdom (not necessarily using all the letters). You must write (in ink), in the space left for that purpose, the longest name you can make by rearranging the letters.

The name containing the greatest number of letters will be the correct solution. If, however, more than one such name can be made out of one set of letters, each will be counted correct.

All the names will be found in the Index to Railway Stations in the January (1903) edition of Bradshaw's Guide. Should you be unable to obtain a copy of this Guide, a reprint of the Index will be sent to you for three penny stamps on application to BRADSHAW'S GUIDE, 59 Fleet Street, London, E.C.; or ROOM EIGHT, "SHORT STORIES," 17 and 18 Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

The first prize of £25 will be given to the competitor who fills in the greatest number of railway stations under the conditions stated. The second prize of £10 will go to the person who fills in the next greatest number, and the other prizes will be awarded in order of merit.

When you have filled in all the names you can find, take out this page and keep it by you. Don't on any account send it to us until the closing date is announced in "SHORT STORIES." Seven more lists will appear.

In the event of a tie a further set (or, if necessary, several further sets) of letters will be submitted to the tieing competitors until one wins the first prize outright.

EXAMPLE:
ABGHIIMMNR... Birmingham.

FIFTH LIST.

49. AFHLMOTU	**55. ABDMORR** .....
50. ABILRRTUY	**56. CEEEILRST** .....
51. AADGGNR	**57. ACEEGHKNOR** .....
52. BEHRRSSUWY	**58. ACIILLSSS** .....
53. AEILPSY	**59. AABCNNRU** .....
54. AADILMVY	**60. AEEKNOSSV** .....

Name..... Address.....

.....

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The Saving of Felicia.

How a Man Worked Out his Redemption.

There was no brighter room in the house than that which Felicia Nelson called her den. It was really her bedroom, but everything about it was so bright and cheerful that she often preferred to sit there rather than in the more formally furnished drawing-room.

All things combined to make the apartment pleasant; it caught more of the sunbeams than any other chamber, Felicia had that happy faculty of making a place look pretty and restful by the style in which she distributed the trifling ornaments and knick-knacks, and Felicia herself was like a ray of light. If she were not reading or otherwise absorbed, she was singing, and everything about her seemed gay.

The contrast between the usual aspect of the apartment, and that which it presented one evening in early summer was very striking. It was as war and desolation compared with peace.

The sky was dark with the raging storm, except when it was rent from end to end by vivid flashes of lightning; the thunder pealed continuously, the rain descended as if another deluge were imminent.

The windows of Felicia's den rattled, shaken by violent gusts of wind, the air appeared to have been changed from sultriness to wintry coldness. The room itself was dull, chilly, desolate, for all the life had vanished from it, as if driven away by the shadow of a great trouble.

Felicia lay stretched on the floor by the side of her bed, motionless, except for an occasional convulsion of the body, such as may be observed in certain children and adults after a violent fit of weeping and sobbing.

A shudder passed through the girl's frame as a flash of lightning passed before the eyes which had opened spasmodically. She felt that the storm of the elements without was a counterpart of the storm of emotions that was going on within her.

"*That* storm will cease and probably leave no trace behind it, but it cannot be so with the tempest which is raging in my heart!" she moaned, shutting her eyes once again. "If I had any room for doubt, if he had been charged on circumstantial evidence I could smile at it; for, terrible as that would be, I should be assured of his innocence, and, when the trouble was over, we should be happy together, happy in the love we bear to each other, and in the consciousness of innocence. But it is too true! He has admitted his guilt!"

She made an effort and rose to her feet, slowly and painfully, as one who is recovering from a weakening illness. She tottered to a chair, and let herself fall into it.

"He has done this!" she cried, a little more animation coming into the tear-dimmed eyes. "He has done this! My love for him, his for me, his own sense of right and wrong, the thought that he would bring disgrace on all of us—all this is not sufficient to maintain his steps in the path of integrity, and he is admittedly guilty of theft. He has stolen money from his employer. He is a paltry thief!"

The fountain of tears was dry; the lovely blue eyes, generally so soft and liquid, were hot and hard. She had given her love to a man who had descended to theft in order to meet liabilities incurred through the vice of gambling.

Her lips curled slightly; her hand clenched, as if to crush out the tiny spark of love which persisted in keeping alight in her breast.

Why are we so perverse? Philip had done that which must kill the love of the woman to whom he was betrothed. Felicia Dixon tried to put out this flame, yet it remained just alive, just a spark, and would not die away!

When the engagement was announced, many people shook their heads. It was natural enough that Philip Harding should fall in love with such a winsome lassie as Felicia, seeing that everybody was in love with her.

It was natural, too, that Philip's manly figure and handsome face, aided by his ingratiating manner, should make him a favourite with the fair sex. Yet, on the closer acquaintance that must have preceded the actual engagement, Felicia should have been able to detect the weakness of the man's character, as shown by the want of solidity about the jaw, and the feebleness in the appearance of the mouth.

"I know all that you are going to say!" she declared haughtily to a lady who desired to put her on her guard. "You are insinuating that he may fall into error. Thank you! But, supposing that your estimate of my lover is correct, I am confident that my love for him will make him strong! Yes, I even feel a sense of pleasure in the thought that I have an opportunity of proving how much the love of a woman can do for the man of her choice!"

The lady, an elderly woman, and a friend of the family, desisted in her benevolent attempt to warn Felicia. This conversation came back to the girl's memory very distinctly, and she passed her hands over her face, pressing them against her cheeks, temples and forehead in the futile effort to drive it away.

"He will not be prosecuted, they tell me," she thought. "He must go away. Will he try to see me? Will he come to beg my pardon for the wrong he has done me? Or is he too weak, too bad, even for that?"

She could not analyse her own feelings; she could not decide whether she wished him to come, or to go away without seeing her. In a dulled state she prepared for bed, not noticing that the thunder and lightning had ceased, but that the rain was still descending in torrents.

Sheer exhaustion made her sleep soundly, and the heavy slumber was Nature's restorative.

She awoke later than usual on the following morning, and felt stronger to meet the sorrow of a love that was worse than lost, because it was disgraced—stronger by far than she had anticipated.

"He is going away; he will not be prosecuted," she repeated several times. It was something to be thankful for! "Will he—will he try to see me?"

She hardly knew whether she wished him to do so or not. At first she curled her lips in contempt at the thought that Philip would venture to stand before her; her tall, graceful figure drew itself up to its full height, her beautiful face lost its sweetness, and assumed a look of sternness, her head was thrown back, and she had the appearance of a veritable goddess inflamed with indignation and wounded feelings.

Then a strange alteration took place. The tiny spark of love flared up for the moment, and she imagined Philip Harding in front of her, penitent, beseeching her to have mercy.

She fancied that she could hear the speech from Shakspeare's great play—"The quality of mercy is not strained." She

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remembered the beautiful prayer which her dead mother had taught her as a little child, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that——"

She could not finish it, even in thought; a softened look came into the lovely eyes, and slowly the attitude and look changed till Felicia resembled a pitying angel of surpassing beauty. If Philip Harding had come at that moment!

"He is gone!" she murmured in the afternoon. "It is a wild day, the rain and the wind have it all their own way, and it a fitting environment for an exit in disgrace and misery! Truly, our sins find us out!"

"Felicia!"

The name was uttered in a hesitating, pleading voice. She had sunk into a reverie, but the sound electrified her into life.

"Philip!" she cried, springing to her feet. "You here? Have you—have you dared to come here, to face me?"

Her voice had grown in fulness as she spoke; the volume of sound had increased as her indignation grew. He quailed before her glance, and his eyes dropped.

"Yes, I have dared!" he replied sadly. He no longer ventured to use her Christian name. "I have come to tell you how much I sorrow over my own downfall and over the effect upon you. Oh!"—he cut himself short as he was about to add "my darling!"—"Oh, you cannot realise how deep is my sorrow, how I loathe myself for this weakness!"

He lifted his eyes to meet hers, hoping to see in them some sign of forgiveness and compassion, but it was the figure of the indignant goddess that met his gaze.

"How entrancingly beautiful she is!" he breathed. He could not fail to observe it, although his own death sentence, the words that would rob him of the last grain of hope, was upon her lips.

"You have robbed me of my happiness in life!" she told him, her body quivering with the scorn of wounded love. "You have deprived me of that which a woman prizes above all things, the love of a worthy man! I gave you my love, the affection which should have caused you to do your utmost to be worthy of it!

"A man should be strengthened in the path of integrity by the thought that a woman has intrusted to him something which is beyond price to her, something which should be held as a sacred charge—her love!

"You have forgotten to guard the treasure; you have brought upon yourself the punishment of the common criminal! Your punishment and debasement recoil upon me! And that is the return which you make to me for the love which my heart poured out to you! Go from me! I wish to be alone!"

"So be it!" he said gravely and firmly.

As the words of his sentence fell on his ears, they had brought out all the strength that lay within him. He recognised the justice of the condemnation, but he waited in vain for a trace of mercy.

The severity of her manner stiffened the weak lines of the mouth; his figure straightened itself, and, although his appearance still indicated penitence, there was more manliness and determination in it than Felicia had ever seen.

The fact struck her and kept her silent.

"I accept your decision. I admit that you are right in all you say, yet——"

He stopped, as if waiting for her to encourage him to go on, but she remained mute. He continued, quietly at first, but with a passionate ring showing itself in his voice as he proceeded.

"I had hoped for some mercy. I have been weak! I have been a fool and a coward to bring this upon you, but it will be a terrible lesson to me! It will be a beneficial lesson, for it shows me my inner self and teaches me how to act and guard myself in the future. "Is there no chance of redemption for a sinner? Am I to have no opportunity of atoning for this miserable slip, and holding my head aloft again, even in this town? Surely, a first fault, a false step in a weak moment, is not to blast my whole life and crush me! If man is so hard, then a Higher Power is more merciful. Tell me, Felicia, is there no hope of redemption?"

His very passion dragged the name from his lips; he held out his hands appealingly. His heart was reflected in his eyes, and she could see the depths of this man's agony. Had she the right to be so hard? *Could* she be so obdurate when that tiny spark of love was threatening to burst into a flame? Could she drive this man from her, telling him that redemption was impossible? Again there came the transition from the indignant goddess to the compassionate angel. He observed the beginning of this change.

"Felicia," he pleaded, "give me a little hope that I may redeem myself in the future! If it is impossible to regain your love, let me at least take with me the consolation that you do not think me utterly bad!"

He knelt before her, taking her hand and gazing with intense earnestness upwards at her exquisite features. How much he had lost!

"Give me a little hope! I have wronged you, but I will do all that is humanly possible to make amends. Do not drive me from you with the thought that nothing remains for me except death or a long life of misery!"

At the window appeared the face of a little child.

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He kissed her hand passionately. She tried to speak, but she had momentarily lost the power of articulation. How strangely Philip had altered! This man breathed a spirit of latent strength which she had never suspected! Was it just that he should be sent away hopeless? Is there no redemption? Oh, yes, yes!

"Shall mortals deny that which their Maker grants?" she said gently. The voice was so tender that it startled Felicia herself; it was not like her own voice, it seemed to be that of someone speaking for her. "Do not kneel before me! I am not worthy of homage, for I, too, have a lesson to learn—the lesson of forgiveness when real repentance is shown.

"Philip, there will be opportunities of redeeming yourself, either by some noble deed or by years of steady work! Go away with that hope! I do not know whether we can ever again be to each other what we were a few hours ago, but we can be true friends, and in the distant land to which you will make your way, you will be gladdened by the thought that at least one person is watching the working out of that redemption!"

He kissed her hand reverently. He still held it as he rose to his feet; he gazed at her earnestly, longingly, for a brief space, then he gently relinquished her hand and passed from the room, turning at the door to take a last farewell look.

The sun shone through the clouds and shed a bright ray across the figure of the girl, and Philip Harding went forth with renewed hope. His last look was indeed upon a pitying angel.

To the other inhabitants of the place the appearance of the sun had a more prosaic meaning, for it betokened the cessation of the rain and relieved many well-founded fears concerning the capability of the river bank to withstand the force of the swollen torrent.

If the rain stopped the threatened danger might be averted, although many people had their doubts. The wind did not drop, that was the disquieting factor, and it might agitate the water to an extent that would encompass the mischief.

It was an hour later when a frightened maid ran to Felicia and gasped out the news.

"Oh, miss, the river bank has given way and the water is flooding the Malling Dale!"

"Is it serious?" demanded Felicia, forgetting her own trouble and thinking only of the danger to other people. "Is the break a wide one? What is being done?"

"The water is flowing along about a foot deep, miss; I haven't heard if the gap is a big one, but the water is rising, and it will knock the wooden houses over and sweep them away if it goes on!" responded the servant.

Felicia required something to take her out of herself, so she hurried to put on her hat and light cloak. It had left off raining, but the wind was so high that it was difficult to keep one's feet at times. Another thought had come to her. Felicia's father was a doctor, and he had intended to call on one of his poor patients in Malling Dale; her child was ill. Had he been caught in the flooding of this sparsely inhabited valley?

Felicia hastened onwards. She lived near the end of the town—it was an old family residence, and the doctor had stayed there—which was not a great way from the Dale; she was therefore one of the first to reach the spot.

Malling Dale extended for about half a mile, from the river bank to a point beyond the town, where it widened into a common. The point at which Felicia reached it was about the centre of its length.

Felicia found the Dale flooded, as the girl had said, to the depth of twelve or eighteen inches. The people were scurrying from their houses or taking to the upper storey; the latter was hardly a safe proceeding, as the rickety places were likely to be washed from their foundations by a strong flow of water. They were mere huts of wood, most of them, and quite a number of them had only one storey.

The unfortunates and their rescuers were wading through the water with some of their belongings. One house stood alone, not a soul being visible, and Felicia recognised that it was the abode of Mrs. Dawson, whom her father intended to visit.

"I am glad that he is not there, and that the poor woman has got away with her child!" thought Felicia thankfully. "The water has burst open the door, so the furniture must be floating about downstairs. Heavens! What is that?"

She might well ask. At the window there appeared the face of a child, and it was easy to see that the little one was crying and in great fear. What could have happened? Perhaps the poor woman had left the child while she went into the town for something she wanted, and the bairn was left to the mercy of the waters!

There was no one near her, but Felicia did not hesitate; drawing her skirts together so that they should not impede her movements, she waded to the hovel and entered. Her anxiety for the child made her deaf to the dull roar that had arisen in the distance.

"Poor little thing!" she said soothingly, as she picked up the little girl of five. "Has mother gone out? Don't be afraid, I will not let the water come to you!"

She pacified the child, keeping her high in her own arms so that her wet clothes should not touch the little thing, and turned to leave the wooden structure dignified by the name of a house. But she started in dismay as she reached the door. The water was rushing along at a great rate; she knew that a larger gap had been made in the river bank and the Dale would soon be a mighty torrent!

Felicia's heart seemed to stand still. She was forced to retreat into the room or the rush of water would have swept her away on its bosom; but the protection of the hovel could be only temporary.

The water was rising, rising, and she had to get on to the bed in order to keep well above the surface. The wooden structure rocked under the force of the water dashing against it.

Felicia's face grew white; she was no poltroon, but this meant death unless a speedy rescue were effected, and who knew that she was in the house?

"I must get to the window and shout!" she said aloud in her anxiety.

She got off the bed and pulled it with all her might near to the window. She mounted it again, threw up the sash, and cried aloud for help. Her face at the window, with the child's face near it, at once became the object of amazed and pitying eyes directed to the house.

Swish! A great force of water rushed against the structure; it rocked and swayed. A loud cry of fear came from the onlookers, and Felicia felt herself thrown against the wall. The wooden home of the Dawsons had been torn from its base, turned on its side, and was being carried down the roaring stream to the common! It would be dashed to pieces against some stronger erection before it had gone far!

Felicia scrambled to her feet to find that she could sit on the edge of the overturned bed and hold to the window frame, the side of which was now the bottom. The overturned house was floating on its side, the roof acting as the stem of this strange craft. The interior was comparatively free from water, as the house was now on the surface of the racing torrent.

Who would save them? Would they be saved? They were drifted from those who might have aided, and their case seemed hopeless.

She leant as far as she could out of the window; she saw the tops of some small trees as they went past; she looked in the direction from which she had come on the surface of the water, and she saw a man in a boat, coming also with the flow of the stream and rowing at the same time in an effort to go faster. Her eyes dimmed as the well known form met her eyes; it was Philip Harding, and he was risking his life to save hers!

Yes, he was making a heroic effort, the noble deed that would work his redemption! She remembered her words to him only a short time previously.

Would he succeed? He was gaining, gaining, but every now and then a concussion of the overturned house against

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some weaker object reminded her of what might happen. The house swayed and rocked fearfully, even as it floated along.

Bump! Felicia was nearly dragged from her hold on the window by the shock, but she felt thankful when she recovered. Her craft was stopped by a brick built house, and its progress arrested without danger!

She looked towards Philip; he was coming now at a great rate, but her gladness changed to horror as she looked. Close upon him was a huge mass of floating trees, parts of wooden houses, and other débris, the whole forming a formidable mass that would crush anything so frail as a boat or the overturned wooden structure which sheltered her—crush it to matchwood! And this mass was coming direct towards her!

The position of Philip's boat was such that by a few powerful strokes he could have sent it beyond the width of this mass and saved himself; but he saw that Felicia was doomed unless her strange vessel could be got away from the empty brick house that detained it. The mass would then dash against the brick and would probably be arrested. Otherwise, the overturned house would be simply smashed between the brick house and the mass of floating débris!

Felicia understood it all, and she watched Philip pulling hard to get to her before the floating débris could crush her and the child. It was a race for life! Philip must increase the space between himself and the mass in order to gain time enough to cause the overturned house to swing clear of its barrier.

Nearer and nearer he came in his cockleshell of a boat, the mass coming swiftly after him. Would he reach her in time? It was doubtful! And what of Philip himself? He was courting death! Would he reach her before that all-crushing mass ground the life out of her and the child?

Nearer and nearer! Oh, at last he reaches the window! There is time to drag them out! He gave a mighty push with his right-hand oar against the overturned hovel, while his left-hand oar was placed against the brick wall at his back, to act as a supporting base. Hurrah! It moved! He pushed harder; the mass was upon them. A mighty effort and he saw the overturned structure clear of its obstruction and disappearing behind the brick house as the rushing water carried it along once more.

And Philip? Felicia, with glassy eyes and a feeling that she had been turned to stone, saw the mass crash against the frail boat as she passed at the back of the house, and then her view was mercifully obstructed!

Felicia was saved; and Philip, by an act of heroism and self-sacrifice which has scarcely been equalled, had worked out his redemption!

F. Brewster.

SISTER ANNE.

The Tale of a Sacrifice.

"If my thoughts are true," said Wistful Doubt, "he will ask me very soon, perhaps this evening, and I can't say 'No' to him, for I love him above all the world. I couldn't live without him."

"It would not make any difference to Nell," said Sisterly Love, "she could live with us."

"He won't mind that when I tell him of my promise to mother," said Tender Heart.

"But I may be mistaken," cried Wistful Doubt; "why should he love me?"

"I am old, nearly thirty years old," said Despair, "and I am neither beautiful nor rich. And I am not clever."

"They say every woman is beautiful to the man who loves her," suggested Wistful Hope, "and he is as old as I am. And Cupid does not consult the birthday book."

She was so much absorbed in her thoughts that she did not hear the door being opened. Nell entered the room and looked quickly round until she saw the figure of her sister who sat by the window.

The firelight danced fitfully across the floor and seemed to throw out welcome and encouragement to Nell, but it could not reach to the other corner. Anne sat amid the twilight and wove the shadows and the fireshine into her dreams.

It was apparent that Nell had come on a difficult errand. She stood by the door for several minutes, still holding the handle, hesitating whether to enter the room. Then she seemed to muster up courage and walked forward on tip-toe. And at last she stood behind the arm-chair, and, stooping swiftly, kissed her sister upon the cheek.

Anne turned in an instant and looked up with her eyes still warm and tender. And Nell took encouragement from that look and opened out her heart.

"Sister Anne," she murmured, using the old title of nursery days, "I want to ask you something. No, don't turn round, stay just as you are, or I shall never be able to tell you."

"What is the matter?" cried the elder sister in some alarm.

"I want to ask your advice," said Nell doubtfully.

"Yes, but tell me, what is it about?"

Even with the shadows, and the fact that Anne was looking the other way, Nell could scarcely explain herself.

"It's about me," she said, and then added with a sudden glow of courage, "and—and somebody else."

"Yes?"

"Supposing I had fallen in love with that somebody else?"

"Is that what you meant, Nell? Is it really?"

"Yes," said Nell, and was too much occupied to notice the delight with which Anne had received the news.

"Who is it, tell me at once?"

"It's Jack Hamilton."

The hand that Anne had raised to place round her sister's neck fell back upon her lap. She turned and stared stonily through the window, seeing nothing, only conscious of a numb sensation as though her heart were freezing. And Nell, gaining courage now she had made the great avowal, continued her story of happiness.

"He hasn't asked me yet, but I think he will. I've liked him ever so much for a long time, but I thought, somehow, that it was you he came to see."

There was no reply from her sister. Only her hand crept forward again in the darkness and drew Nell down, until their faces lay together.

"I did not know I loved him until yesterday," she continued, "when we met in Barker's Lane. He said he was coming to see us to-night and had something very important to ask me.

"I guessed what he meant, because he's been here so often

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lately, and he's been so kind to me, and seemed pleased to be with me. But I'm only twenty years old," she added wistfully, "and I may be mistaken. Do you think it is so, Anne, and do you think I ought to say 'Yes' to him?"

Then for an instant a picture flashed before Anne's eyes. The picture of a woman who lay dying, and who, with her last breath, confided her younger daughter to the care of the elder one.

"Since you love him," she said quietly, "there is no reason why you should not say 'Yes' to him. And you must try to make him very happy, Nell, for I think he deserves it."

And in this way, quietly and unostentatiously, Anne made the great renunciation of her life.

During the evening the front door bell rang. Nell's arm tightened suddenly round her sister, she quivered for an instant, and then was still. They heard the housemaid passing along the hall.

"Come," said Sister Anne, "let us go to the drawing-room."

Ten minutes later she was back in her former place by the window. She had made some trifling excuse and left them to their happiness.

In that ten minutes the firelight had sunk into a smouldering lethargy with only an occasional leap and sparkle.

As Anne crossed the room and entered the grim shadows that surrounded her chair, she felt as though she, too, had sunk into lethargy, into a life that for the moment was all darkness. And if the Recording Angel noted the tear that presently rolled down her cheek and splashed upon her hand, it was only that it might be made another jewel for her crown of self-sacrifice.

Meanwhile Jack Hamilton closed the door of the drawing-room, and then hurriedly returned to his seat.

"Nell," he said, leaning forward, "will you do something that will help to make me very, very happy?"

"I don't know, it depends."

"It's just this. I've fallen in love with the best and the dearest girl in all England; but I'm afraid to ask her, I'm diffident all at once, and I want you to help me."

"How can I help you? What can I do?" murmured Nell.

"You can tell me if you think I have any chance. Not that I shall cease to love her whatever you say, but if you tell me your sister does not dislike me, or perhaps even likes me a little——"

"My sister—Anne?"

"Yes, do you think——" and then he stopped, for Nell turned suddenly and faced him with a look in her eyes he had never seen there before.

Anne's fondness for dreaming in the twilight, her sudden silence when she heard the name of the man whom Nell loved, her great self-sacrifice for the girl to whom she had been both mother and sister for so many years.

"Oh!" muttered Nell, with a sob in her voice, "I was blind—I should have known! Anne is in the morning-room," she cried, turning to Jack with all her soul shining in tenderness from her eyes. "Go to her now. Ask her. I think she loves you."

Jack was halfway across the room in an instant. Then he turned suddenly and came back and kissed Nell:

"You will live with us after we are married?" he whispered.

"Yes; but go now—she is alone."

Jack made his way to the morning-room. It was almost dark, even the fire had smouldered away. Anne sat alone by the window, and the moonlight creeping in, illuminated her with its own glory. Jack advanced upon tiptoe without knowing why he did so.

Nell was aroused from her reflections five minutes later by hearing the front door closed. She sprang to her feet, ran to the window, pulled aside a corner of the blind. The sudden suspicion that had come into her mind was verified. Jack Hamilton was walking slowly down the steps, with his head bent and his arms swinging listlessly.

She was out of the room and after him in a moment. He turned hurriedly at the sound of her footsteps.

"You were mistaken, Nell," he said gently.

"No, come back with me." She almost dragged him into the drawing-room. "Wait, I will fetch Anne; you must not let her say 'No'—make her say she does not love you."

"She has already said that," said Jack.

But Nell did not hear him. She ran into the other room. It was empty. Anne had disappeared, and the chair by the window looked like something incomplete.

She hurried upstairs to her sister's bedroom, and there she found Anne, and assumed a masterful tone at once.

"You've sent Jack Hamilton away," she protested, "and nearly broke his heart and your own. He loves you, and nobody else, so the sooner you say 'Yes' the better."

"But you?"

"Pooh! Rubbish!" said Nell sturdily; and then she broke down for an instant and flung her arms round her sister's neck and cried, and laughed, and cried again. "You dear old Sister Anne, did you think I would accept such a sacrifice after I knew?

"Won't you let me have my turn now and you say 'Yes'? and, oh! you will make a lovely bride, Anne, with your beautiful brown eyes and your straight nose and the curve of your chin.

"If I were a man, I'd fall in love with you myself. As for my features, they're all right in their way, but they're 'hodd-uns,' as old Thompson told me yesterday. So come downstairs with me at once"—she was coaxing Anne out on to the corridor by this time—"and sit down by the drawing-room fire and we can talk matters over;" they were halfway down the stairs now. "But, of course, it's understood that I won't accept Jack at any price!" and, with this remark, Nell opened the door and ushered her sister into the drawing-room.

She heard two cries of astonishment as she closed the door, and then she ran up to her own room, and was seen no more for half an hour. At the end of that time she descended the stairs, armed with all her native cheerfulness, and solemnly informed Jack that she thought of buying a black tabby to console her for the loss of Sister Anne.

Wal Frank.

She: "Do you believe that too many cooks spoil the broth?" He: "Yes; far too many."

Bertha: "And so Edith has made up with Fred? How did it happen?" Albert: "Oh, you see, it was the only way she could have another quarrel with him."

She: "But he has such a delightful way of saying things—quite a poetic temperament." He (a rival): "Yes, he has soarings after the infinite, and divings after the unfathomable, but he never pays cash!"

"There is only one reason," he said, "why I have never asked you to be my wife." "What is that?" she asked. "I have always been half afraid you might refuse." "Well," she whispered, after a long silence, "I should think you'd have curiosity enough to want to find out whether your suspicion was well-founded or not."

A gentleman admires a charming widow over whose head seventeen summers have passed at least thrice. "Oh, yes," said one of his friends, "she's very charming, I know; still, you must admit that she is wrinkled." "Wrinkled!" echoes the chivalrous lover. "No, sir. There may be the indelible impression of a smile upon her face here and there, but that is all."

The following Tartans have already appeared on the covers of "Short Stories":

No. 1.—MENZIES ...	*Issue dated August 2nd, 1902.*
No. 2.—MACPHERSON ...	*,, ,, August 16th, 1902.*
No. 3.—MACLEOD ...	*,, ,, September 13th, 1902.*
No. 4.—ROB ROY ...	*,, ,, October 4th, 1902.*
No. 5.—MACMILLAN ...	*,, ,, October 25th, 1902.*
No. 6.—MACDONALD of SLEAT	*,, ,, November 29th, 1902.*
No. 7.—ERSKINE	*,, ,, January 3rd, 1903.*
No. 8.—CLERGY ...	*,, ,, February 7th, 1903.*
No. 9.—BRUCE ...	*,, ,, April 25th, 1903.*

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Below is Our Great New Serial.

THE BOND BETWEEN.

A Romance of Real Life. By BLANCHE EARDLEY.

NAMES TO REMEMBER.

SIR TREVOR MAITLAND, of Maitland Manor, Melton.
LADY MAITLAND, Sir Trevor's second wife. Before her marriage with him she passed as a widow named Mrs. Vernon.
JACK MAITLAND, Sir Trevor s son by his first wife.
AGNES MAITLAND } Jack's sisters.
MURIEL MAITLAND }
WOOLF MAITLAND, the present Lady Maitland's only child.
IVY STRANGE, a foundling with whom Jack is in love.
HERIOT NORTH, a friend of Sir Trevor.
MIKE HOLLAND, an ex-convict and burglar who blackmails Lady Maitland, he having been in prison with her first husband.
MARY MASON, Lady Maitland's maid.
DIGBY SCARLETT, an explorer and acquaintance of Jack. It was through him that Lady Maitland's first husband was imprisoned.
GILBERT CHASE, a detective employed by Jack to discover the mystery of Ivy's birth.
VERNON GRANT, Lady Maitland's first husband.

EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

"Good-bye, Sweetheart! Good-bye!"

It was the day of the *bal masqué* at the Manor, and just two days after Lady Maitland had spoken to the foundling, Ivy Strange, about the honour done her by the new master of the "Rest," in wishing to make her his wife.

Since the occasion when the girl had taken the two letters into the spinny to the waiting man, she had not been up to the Manor, and Muriel and Jack who had called at the lodge had been informed that she had caught a chill. But the second time Jack was not to be sent away when Mrs. Parkins met him with the same excuse.

"Is Ivy in bed, Mrs. Parkins?" he said quietly.

The woman hesitated.

"No, sir; she is sitting in the parlour by the fire. But she seems queer-like—the ghost of her bright self—for all the world as though she 'ad something on 'er mind."

"Then I must see her." Jack spoke firmly; a sense of foreboding stealing over him. It was so uncommon for his bright, winsome little sweetheart to be laid up, that he felt there was something behind it all.

"If she is well enough to sit by the fire, Mrs. Parkins, she is well enough to see me, her future husband."

He strode past her, into the tiny sitting-room that Mrs. Parkins always called the "parlour," and flushed with pained surprise as he saw the face of the silent, listless girl sitting in the one armchair. It had been the face of a happy, joyous child before, now it was the face of a saddened woman; and in the large, violet eyes there lurked a frightened, furtive, look that changed to one of startled love, as they fell upon the figure in the doorway.

"Jack!" she murmured, rising from the chair, and putting out one tremulous hand to steady herself; "you should not have come here!"

He came forward quickly and took her in his arms. "Indeed! That is a very tall order to issue from the lips of my 'princess' to her 'Prince Charming.' I shall begin to think that you don't consider me worthy your heart and hand now, beloved, and have bestowed them on another."

He was not prepared for the result of his tenderly-playful reproach upon the silent girl in his arms.

With a slight cry, she broke away from him, and faced him with quivering lips. "You are right," she said, speaking quickly and in a low, distinct voice; "I have changed my mind. You must not think of me as your—'princess' any longer—only—only—as the girl at the lodge!"

"Ivy! Ivy!" he exclaimed, in bewilderment. "Do you know what you are saying? That you don't love *me*—your lover! Oh, my darling! You must be playing some cruel joke on me! Testing my love for you!"

She shook her head, dully. "No, I am not joking," she said steadily, speaking with averted eyes. "I am in earnest; I can never—never—marry you. You must not ask me for any reason," she went on hurriedly, "only go—Jack! Leave me, and—forget me!"

He laughed shortly.

"It's not so easy for me to forget as it is for you to cast me off. I have a right to know why I am being treated like this," he said passionately. "I can't believe that two days have changed your love into hate, unless there have been some strange things happening to turn it into another channel!"

"Ah, no!—don't say that!" she cried. "Nothing could ever make me cease to love you; but you must be to me like a beautiful dream I once fancied real."

He went up to her swiftly, and put his hands on her shoulders, looking down into her face with tender eyes.

"Ah, sweetheart! You admit that you love me! What then can come between us? What can ever prevent our love from continuing in the same sweet way as formerly? You are ill and unstrung, my dearest," he went on soothingly; "but you will cheer up when I tell you that you may soon expect some news about the quest you intrusted to me."

She shuddered and drew away from him with frightened eyes. "Don't! Oh, if you have any love for me at all," she cried, clasping her hands together feverishly, "you will do as I ask you in this as in the other thing. In future you can be nothing to me, and I have decided not to—to—trouble about the past. I am content to let things remain in—in oblivion."

She turned away and looked out of the window with misty eyes. She could not trust herself to gaze upon the misery a cruel Fate had demanded that she should bring into the life of the man she loved. It was enough if he let her pass out of his thoughts without the agony of listening to his reproaches.

His voice disturbed her. It sounded harsh, and the ringing note of yesterday had gone from it.

"Then I am to understand that, in spite of your having professed to love me, that it was all pretence—a fraud—of which you are now tired; and that even the parents you longed to meet have lost their value in your eyes, and you have ceased to wish that the secret should be solved?"

She bowed her head, dumb with pain. She dared not let herself speak, unless the agony in her heart betrayed itself in her voice.

"At least," he went on, white with pain, "at least, you will give me some reason for this cruel conduct? Is—is there *another* man?" And his jealous young eyes were keen to note the wave of colour that scorched her face.

She turned proudly. "Why do you make it harder for me? Can't you see that it hurts me—as much as it does you! There is no other man that I shall ever love—I swear that!"

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THE BOND BETWEEN.

she cried passionately; "but I mean it when I repeat that in future our ways in life lie far apart, and—and there is no mystery to be solved now!"

"No mystery!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean, Ivy? Have you heard——"

"I have heard enough to convince me that I need seek no further!" she said wearily. "Oh, why don't you leave me? I—I can't stand much more!"

"What have you heard?" he said doggedly. "I will not annoy you any further, as soon I know. But all the same I will do what I vowed I would—seek out this mystery for myself!"

"No, no!" she cried piteously. "For my sake, Jack, don't! I know that—that—my father——"

"Ah, Jack! Is that you?" said a clear, musical voice behind them, and, turning quickly, the eyes of the girl and her lover fell upon the radiant figure of Lady Maitland.

"I am surprised to find you here," she said graciously. "I imagined that Ivy was too ill to see anyone. I called to say that I think it will do you good to appear to-night at the fancy dress ball." And her eyes rested on the white, mute face of the girl near the window.

"I came to see Ivy, thinking I had a right to do so!" Jack replied impatiently.

"Ah?" And Lady Maitland raised her brows.

"I have told—Jack——" the girl said slowly, "that our engagement does not exist any longer. I think it wiser for us both to break it off."

A gentle sigh fluttered to the lips of Sir Trevor Maitland's wife.

"But," said Jack, his voice ringing once more with determination, "I will not recognise that decision, Ivy. There is someone behind you, urging you on. I mean to find out who it is! You love me; you have just confessed that you can never love another man; and with that knowledge I mean to fight out this mystery by myself. Good-bye, little sweetheart!" he said tenderly; "although your lips deny me—your heart does not!"

With one lingering look he turned on his heel and left the lodge, his love wounded more than he cared to own before the cold, proud wife of his father.

"Come," said her ladyship sharply, after a long pause; "don't mope in that way, girl! I wish you to come up to the Manor to-night and enjoy yourself. It will do you good!" She hesitated, then said slowly, "I hope you have told nothing of the confidence I have reposed in you, to—Jack?"

The girl flushed. "No," she replied, in a low voice, "I have told him nothing, Lady Maitland. Of course, knowing what I do, I would never marry him to bring disgrace upon him."

"But," said her ladyship slowly, "I would strongly advise you to marry Digby Scarlett, because he not only happens to know of your parentage—but he loves you, in spite of it."

"Oh, please, Lady Maitland!" cried the girl, "don't talk to me about anyone else—just yet. You don't think what this has cost me. I—I—can't stand any more now!"

"Very well!" said Lady Maitland gently; "I will leave you to think over what I have said, and I expect you to be at the Manor this evening. Remember, Ivy, I will have no nonsense; shake off this foolish infatuation, and be thankful that you have the chance of marrying well, in spite of your—unfortunate birth!"

She sailed out of the room, said a few smiling words to the curtsying Mrs. Parkins, and, stepping into the carriage that had waited for her, drove away.

As she leant back against the padded sides of the luxurious brougham, Lady Maitland smiled grimly.

"I am glad this has happened, after all," she murmured. "My star is in the ascendant once more. I had begun to fancy otherwise! The girl will be like wax in my hands, and *he* will win the rustic bride he covets!"

The drive was thickly studded by huge trees on either side, and the late December afternoon was dark and gloomy, causing her ladyship to draw her fur closer round her with a slight shiver.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness, a shadow seemed to spring. It paused a moment by the side of the carriage that had come to an abrupt standstill, owing to the shying of the horses, and a long, lean hand flung a piece of paper into one of the half-open windows, where it fluttered on to the knee of the woman seated among her furs.

"What is the matter, Denton?" said Lady Maitland sharply to the coachman. "Has anything happened?"

"No, my lady," replied the man; "only a tramp frightened the 'orses."

She sank back with a sigh, then her hand came in contact with the scrap of paper on her knee.

"What is this?" she thought idly; and under the light of the carriage-lamp she opened it slowly with dainty fingers.

A few moments later, when the brougham stopped in front of the entrance hall of the Manor, the woman who stepped out of it looked strangely pale and worn, while in her eyes there shone a haggard, desperate gleam.

NINETEENTH CHAPTER.
Lady Maitland's Double.

The *bal masqué* was nearing its height at eleven, and every beautiful room in the Manor was flooded with brilliant electric light, and the notes of the Blue Hungarian Band floated through the windows out into the grounds. A temporary marquee had been erected outside the porch of the Manor, in order to shelter the guests from the gale as they left their carriages.

Sir Trevor Maitland's lovely wife was, as usual, the belle of the ball. Never before had her eyes shone so softly, or her low laugh been so infectious. Over her pale green tulle gown she had a domino of turquoise blue brocade, the daring combination of colour setting off her imperious style of beauty, and drawing all eyes upon her.

Heriot North came up to her as, for a brief moment, she stood alone, gazing upon the moving mass of faces with an absent smile.

"You seem to have gathered together a bevy of fair women and brave men," he said, lightly, his eyes lingering on the curves of mouth and throat of the woman he had met too late in life.

"Fair women are easy to find," she laughed. "but brave men are becoming more rare each day!"

"Don't say that!" he broke in eagerly. "I am ready to prove myself brave, if you wish it!"

"Perhaps I may test you—soon," she answered lightly, an undercurrent of earnestness making her voice slightly uneven.

As he moved away unwillingly, to claim a partner, Lady Maitland sent a strange look after him.

"Perhaps—to-night, even," she murmured under her breath. "But how to make him understand, without betraying—all! I must think of a way out! Fool that I was to have sent that letter to the wretched convict! Now he is doubly blackmailing me! But to-night will see the end of his triumph!"

"May I speak to you, alone, for a few seconds?" said someone behind her, and although in the costume of a gentleman of Louis XVI.'s reign, and masked, she recognised the voice of Digby Scarlett.

"Is it important?" she answered shortly.

He smiled: "Does Lady Maitland imagine that I would seek a private audience with her for a frivolous reason?"

"Follow me," she said coldly, replacing her mask; and, preceding him, she slowly moved among her guests, exchanging compliments and graceful speeches with one and the other, until she reached her boudoir.

Digby Scarlett closed the door softly.

"Tell me," he said abruptly, "have you persuaded that girl to give up her boy lover?"

She bowed her head: "Yes; I put it to her that with her

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ignominious birth it would be wrong to let him marry her. She apparently has fallen in with my suggestion!"

A peculiar smile lit up the evil eyes of her guest as he said, slowly:

"So you impressed her with her obscure parentage, did you? That—that was clever of you! Did you also say that it would be advisable for her to look upon me as her future husband?"

"Yes," she replied coldly; "but I think—if I may suggest it," she added maliciously, "that you would stand a better chance of winning the girl were you to wait until she has got over the—the break with her lover! She is young, and her first love affair is sure to harden her heart against the second—at first!"

"Ah!" he sneered, his white teeth showing in a sarcastic grin, "I presume you speak from the wine-press of your own experience, Lady Maitland! But I don't choose to bide my time. I have spent my life in too much dallying. Now the last leaf in the laurel of my patience is nearly mine!" he cried exultantly. "I have done with waiting!"

She looked at him curiously.

"Why have you set your heart on that foundling? I should have thought a man of your nature would have wished to make a good marriage. There is Muriel, for instance."

He laughed harshly: "Don't be afraid, Lady Maitland, I am more than satisfied with my choice—more than proud of the lovely foundling. But," he went on, in a lower tone, "don't you dare to play me false; stick to your part of the bargain, my lady, and I will stick to mine. Is the girl here? I want to see her!"

Lady Maitland opened her mouth to answer him, when suddenly, through her mask, her eyes grew fixed with horror, and the words on her lips died away in an incoherent gurgle.

"What's the matter?" said Scarlett quickly; "can I do anything for you?"

"No—no!" she murmured, waving him off. "I am subject to these attacks; they seize me suddenly. You asked me if the girl was in the Manor," she went on hastily; "yes, she is. I told my maid to give her a domino and mask. She is probably with Muriel in the ball-room."

When he left the room Lady Maitland went up to the window and stared through with anxious eyes. The blinds had not been drawn, and only a moment ago she fancied that a sallow face with cruel, mocking eyes, had been watching her. It had vanished as soon as she had turned her head, but the memory of it made her shiver.

"Suppose he had seen it!" she muttered. "He would have recognised it as the face of the beggar he had seen that same day he met Ivy in the wood! So my blackmailer is growing bolder!" She shut her teeth with a sharp click. "To-night, at half-past eleven! I can easily slip away; we do not unmask till twelve! I shall be back by that time!"

She mingled among her guests for a brief period, then glided to her room. On the threshold she met Ivy, looking white and sad-eyed.

"You here still, child!" she said in surprise, noting with vexation the girl's listless manner.

"Yes, Lady Maitland," the girl murmured, flushing. "My head was aching and I stayed here to be quiet, and finished mending the lace you gave me to do."

Lady Maitland looked at her suspiciously.

"Have you been talking to Jack?" she said coldly.

"I have not seen him," Ivy replied, lifting her head and flashing a proud look into her ladyship's face.

"That is well," she said slowly. "I am glad you have shown some commonsense, because Mr. Scarlett informs me that he desires to marry you as soon as possible!"

"No! no!" the girl gasped hoarsely. "I cannot marry him! I cannot!"

"Hush, you little fool!" said her ladyship, in a low voice. "If you do not choose to marry him, then resign yourself to ruining the life of the man you profess to love!"

Ivy raised her head, fear shining out of her pain-stricken eyes.

"What do you mean?" she whispered. "He, my—the man in the wood—has been nearly paid—now!"

Lady Maitland made a gesture of contempt. "The man in the wood is not the man to fear—for Jack. But," she lowered her voice cautiously, "Digby Scarlett holds a certain paper of Jack's that, if he produced it, would bring sorrow and shame on Sir Trevor. Now you know why he has been silent about it, because he fell in love with you!"

"Surely Jack would do nothing wrong?" the girl panted; "he is the soul of honour!"

A sneer played round the mouth of her ladyship. "Most men are till they are found out! But you—the foundling, brought up by charity instead of being sent to the workhouse—ought at least to sacrifice yourself for the sake of the man who has given you the education and surroundings of refinement."

"How cruel you are!" the girl moaned; "cannot you pity me also? Am I not suffering as well?"

"You are young," replied the older woman coldly, whose beauty was just a trifle more mature than that of the girl before her "and youth can survive a great deal! But come," she continued in a kinder tone "you must remember that I have made you my confidant and that I look to you to help me to keep Sir Trevor in ignorance of what might be a fatal shock did he get to know! Now you must go downstairs and mix with the guests; but first have you a domino to wear?"

Ivy shook her head. The grim irony of decking herself up for a fancy dress ball while her heart was aching and burning with the intensity of suppressed emotion, struck her with a sense of unreality.

Lady Maitland rang her bell: "Félice, bring out a domino for Miss Strange, and a mask."

The maid looked puzzled: "Dere is none dat I can find, milady" she said "only ze one like dat your ladyship 'as on!"

Her mistress' eyes dilated with a sudden thought.

"Ah! Then bring it here for Miss Strange. It is lucky that I thought about having two!"

When the woman had helped the silent girl into the fellow to the domino that her mistress was wearing, Lady Maitland laughed softly.

"Now you really look something like *me*, Ivy!" she exclaimed. "Here is your mask and here is a string of pearls to wear! Go down," she continued, "and I will follow you shortly. And," she touched the girl's arm warningly, "remember I trust you to try and listen to Mr. Scarlett, should you see him—for Jack's sake—and his father's!"

When Ivy had left the room, Lady Maitland laughed again.

"That girl is a most useful 'dummy'! In that cloak and mask she will effectually pass for my double, and I fancy I have frightened her into submission this time!"

She turned the key in the lock, then hastily took off her blue domino and exchanged it for a black ulster; then from a drawer she drew a dark wig, with which she covered her own bright hair; afterwards winding round her head a black woollen hood that partially concealed her face.

She went to the door, then turned back.

"They say it is unlucky to turn back!" she thought; "but not in my case. I shall take my luck with me!"

She opened another drawer—this time in her escritoire—and took out the small, shining thing she had kept so long in her possession.

"You will help me—perhaps—who knows!" she murmured. Then, with whitening lips, she switched off the electric light, opened her door, stole swiftly along the corridor, and down the kitchen stairs that led out by a side door into the garden.

* * *

"Ivy, darling, I have waited to speak to you—hung round here in this miserably gay house just for the chance of meeting you, my cruel little love, and to implore you to tell me that you were joking with me this morning when you said that all was over between us!" And Jack Maitland,

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cloaked and masked, as the occasion demanded, drew the shrinking figure of his sweetheart into the conservatory.

"Don't, Jack!" said the girl, in a low, frightened voice, nervously playing with the mask in her hand. "I told you this afternoon that it could never be the same between us—never; and—and—I do not wish it to be!" she added slowly. "I made a mistake in thinking that it could."

"Then you care for someone else?" and his cold, even tones struck a chill to the heart of the girl.

"No!" she murmured, "but—but—oh, Jack, can't you see that I have a strong reason to make me break my word? Don't torture me, dear. I have enough to bear without that."

He released her slowly. "And you won't tell me your reason for refusing to let me go on with the inquiry about your parentage?"

"I cannot," she said faintly. "It will be useless; don't ask me any more. I—I——"

She paused, a sudden movement among the palms stopping the words on her lips.

TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

The Shot in the Night.

"Miss Strange is engaged to me—now, Maitland," said a voice behind them, and Digby Scarlett, mask in hand, stepped forward into the light.

"You?" said Jack, speaking thickly. "You lying scoundrel! How dare you, after the lesson I gave you some time ago, trespass upon this lady and myself? If you don't instantly apologise I shall kick you out!"

"Then I appeal to Miss Strange," the other man laughed sneeringly. "She will inform you that I am no lying scoundrel in saying she is to be my wife!"

Jack seized the girl with trembling hands. The veins on his brow were standing out like cords, swollen and discoloured.

"Deny this man's presumptuous lie, darling," he gasped. "Prove that he is wilfully insulting you!"

"I cannot!" she moaned. "It is not a lie!"

Digby Scarlett laughed exultantly. "There you are, Maitland! Ivy has told you that I am perfectly right in claiming her as my future wife. You had better apologise for your rudeness!"

"Does this mean that you love—that creature?" Jack said in a low voice, to the girl leaning heavily against him, and whose cold hands clung wildly to him.

"No!" she gasped. "I don't love him—but—I am going to marry him. I love you, Jack—now and always!"

Her hands fell from his, and she would have fallen had he not caught her to him and held her tightly.

"Come," said Digby Scarlett roughly, "she has owned to being my promised wife, it is my place to take her from you if she has fainted!"

He took a step forward, but the light in the boy's eyes made him hesitate.

"I am taking her back to the house," said Jack, in a strained, peculiar voice, "but I shall have much pleasure in meeting you in the wood afterwards, and giving you any satisfaction you may desire. I am more than willing to risk my future chances of salvation, to save the woman I love from a living death with a man she hates!"

Across the body of the unconscious girl he shot a defiant look at the man who had stepped between them, and the meaning of that glance sent a cold shiver through the man who had betrayed his friend a second time.

"As you will!" he said, with a sneer. "It matters not who takes her now. She belongs to me, and will do so to the end! I will meet you in the wood later, and we will there finish our discussion satisfactorily!"

He left the conservatory by the door leading into the grounds, and disappeared in the shadows that led up to the Manor. As he entered the hall a quiet-looking man gazed after him.

"So that is Mr. Digby Scarlett, is it?" he muttered. "I don't remember his face, but the moment the woman 'Mason' mentioned his name the other day, I knew where I had heard it before. It's strange his coming down here after all this time! I wonder if he ever thinks of the occasion when his evidence sent his friend to 'chokey!'"

Some moments later, Gilbert Chase met Jack Maitland clad in ordinary garb walking down the drive.

The ball was at its height, and the dominos and masks lent an aid to wearied souls in escaping from the gaiety that cloyed.

"Ah, I just wanted a few words with you, Chase!" he said. "I don't think there is any necessity for you to stay longer in Melton now. I am more than half inclined to give up the inquiry on which I started you!"

"How's that?" ejaculated the detective shortly. "Do you mean, sir, that I am to throw it up?"

"Yes," said the young fellow impatiently. "I—I—am no longer engaged to Miss Strange, and she has requested me to cease seeking out the past."

Gilbert Chase was silent. He was thinking of a few nights ago, when he had overheard a conversation between a man and a girl. Then, when they had gone, he had searched about with the aid of matches, and picked up one or two pieces of paper now in his pocket.

"Let me see, sir?" he said slowly. "What is the name of the young lady?"

"Ivy Strange," Jack replied curtly.

"Ah! So she does not wish you to look any more for her parents?" the man went on slowly. "It sounds almost as though she may have heard something—or just knew something—not quite nice about them! On the other hand, sir, she may have someone behind her, making her break off with you, to serve some purpose of their own!"

Jack clutched the detective's arm tightly.

"By Jove! that's it, Chase, and I believe it's that brute Scarlett who is at the bottom of it all!"

"Humph!" murmured Gilbert Chase. "Then you think that Mr. Scarlett is after her, and frightening her?"

"I do," replied the boy firmly. "And I have changed my mind now, Chase. We—you and I—will fight this out for ourselves, and find out whether there is any false play going on. For marry Scarlett she shall not! I would kill him first!"

"I don't think we need go so far as that, sir," smiled the detective, "but I certainly agree with you in satisfying ourselves."

Jack laughed recklessly. "Leave no stone unturned, Chase. Digby Scarlett can know nothing about Ivy Strange. He only came here a little over a month ago, through my wretched instrumentality," he said bitterly. "Fool that I was to bring him! But to-night I have something to say to Mr. Scarlett—alone!"

As he strode away the detective sent an anxious glance after him. "Hot-headed and impulsive! I hope the boy will do nothing rash! It's just as well that I did not tell him all I heard in the spinny! As to my old friend Mike Holland being a loving father, well, I must find out a little more before I express my opinion!"

He stood for a moment looking through the window into the ball-room, where all was brilliancy and laughter. "It's well to be Lady Maitland," he said. "All this wealth and her own beauty should make any woman happy!"

As he walked thoughtfully away he murmured, "Yes, she is a very fortunate lady! It's strange I haven't seen her since that day outside the post office!"

Suddenly he stopped.

What was that loud, sharp report that sent an unexpected thrill through the lean body of the detective? Surely there were poachers in the spinny, or—and a damp moisture burst out on his brow.

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"He could not have been so mad—so reckless!" he muttered. "There was nothing to gain by it, yet I saw him go off in the direction of the wood!"

He hurried his steps into a quick run—the old instinct of the hound and fox gaining the ascendency. As he neared the spinny, some ten minutes later, a second shot rang out clearly, then a third, and an instant later a shape, blurred and shadowy, collided with that of the detective.

It was pitch dark, and he could only distinguish a mass of hair under a shawl, and hear the panting breath of the frantic creature as she tried to drag her arm out of his grasp.

"Who are you?" he said loudly. "What are you doing here, and why are you running away?"

The woman did not speak, and the man's hand still held her wrist firmly, while he attempted to strike a light with the other. Suddenly the woman bent her head, and before Gilbert Chase knew what had happened, her teeth had met in his flesh, sending a sharp, stinging pain up his arm, and he involuntarily let her go, with an exclamation. As he did so she swiftly ran into the darkness and disappeared, leaving the baffled detective ruefully binding up his hand with his handkerchief.

"All right!" he muttered grimly. "I'll have you yet, my black-haired vixen! I managed to leave a mark on your soft arm that I shall recognise anywhere!"

TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

"I Claim your Promise."

THE hour of midnight had struck, and instantaneously the word went forth, "Unmask!" In the centre of the ballroom Sir Trevor Maitland's lovely wife stood, receiving the congratulations of her guests, and listening to their flatteries and platitudes. Only a very close observer would have noticed the slight quiver of her short upper lip, and that the blue domino rose and fell with her quickened breathing almost as though the mistress of Maitland Manor had been hurrying.

"I'm sorry you felt faint a short time ago, dear!" said Sir Trevor, coming up to his wife solicitously.

"How did you know that, Trevor?" she replied, smiling on him archly. "I thought I had kept it a secret!"

"So you had," he answered, "but I saw Jack coming out of your dressing-room and closing the door, as I was passing along the corridor. I stopped and asked him what was the matter, and he told me he had taken you to your dressing-room, as you felt suddenly faint, and did not wish to be disturbed for a short time, so I went downstairs to entertain our guests."

Lady Maitland could have laughed aloud as she listened to her husband's words. Her trick had succeeded even better than she had anticipated, for in the fellow domino to her own, and masked, she guessed that Jack had had a scene with Ivy, who had fainted, and in desperation the boy had carried his sweetheart into her dressing-room, the blue domino, like her own, aiding him in shielding the girl from his father's questions! So he had innocently proved an alibi—should she require one!

She looked round keenly, but among the unmasked faces of her guests she failed to see either Digby Scarlett or Jack.

Where were they? she wondered, with a quickening of her breath. Had the faint of that girl been brought about by a quarrel with the two men, or were they in the supper-room?

She moved slowly towards the door, attracted by a small crowd that seemed to have collected, and as she drew nearer she heard such expressions as "Give him air!" "Send for the doctor quickly!" and calls for some ice.

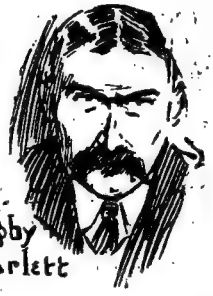
"What is it?" she said hurriedly, parting the crowd with hasty hands, and leaning forward, she saw, lying still and white, with an ugly wound on his temple from which the blood was trickling down his face and matting his hair, the elder son and heir of her husband!

"Jack!" she exclaimed; "oh, my poor boy! How did this happen?"

She knelt down and took his head on her knee, looking a lovely picture of the "ministering angel," as she bent over the prostrate form.

"Where did this awful thing happen?" she said again, raising her voice. "Surely poachers would not dare!"

"No, my lady," said a respectful voice behind her; "it was no poachers that did this to Mr. Maitland. I heard the shot myself, and found him unconscious in the spinny."



Lady Maitland slowly turned her head; her eyes were partially veiled by the fringe of dark lashes, and the sudden contraction of her pupils at the sound of the voice that had come from the group of sympathisers, was unnoticed. She saw a slim, insignificant-looking man, with gentle blue eyes and a deprecating manner, yet in the firmly closed mouth there lay a suspicion of dormant strength of purpose.

Sir Trevor Maitland's wife shivered—then smiled. She recognised the man as the stranger whom she had seen some time ago entering Jack's den.

"Ah," she murmured quietly. "Then you *have* an idea regarding the personality of the creature who did this?"

The man smiled strangely. "Yes, your ladyship," he replied, "I have an idea that it was no man who shot Mr. Maitland."

"No man?" she exclaimed bewildered. "Then whom do you suspect?"

"A woman, your ladyship," replied the man calmly, reaching out his hand, round which was a dirty handkerchief, and speaking in a clear, ringing voice; "the same she-fiend that did this to *me*, struck at Mr. Maitland!"

Beneath the burnished curls on Lady Maitland's white brow a few drops of moisture trickled, cementing the tiny chestnut rings of hair on to her forehead.

"I am distressed to hear this!" she murmured regretfully; "I can hardly imagine that my step-son would have an enemy. But if you have a clue to this woman's identity, I hope you will do your utmost to track her to her punishment!"

The group of frightened guests had gradually melted away, and carriages soon bore them down the drive from the scene of the tragedy; and only a few servants lingered in the vicinity of the stricken family, awaiting the arrival of the doctor.

Suddenly, above the sound of voices, there rang out a cry that startled and thrilled the hearers with different emotions; and before the amazed listeners could intervene, a slim, girlish figure in black, with a strained, white face, and fear-laden eyes, had flung herself down beside the prostrate body of Jack Maitland.

"Oh, my dearest!" she cried wildly; "they tell me you are dead—dead! And I was not by your side to receive one look of pardon, one glance of love! They have killed your body, as they killed our happiness! Now I shall have two horrors to haunt me—a murdered heart, and a murdered love! Oh, my dear! my dear!"

Her words trailed off into a moan, and her hands sought the still face of the boy who had been her lover. Suddenly she spoke again, and this time her words arrested the attention of the man who had brought Jack Maitland to the house.

"Forgive me, dear! I know who killed you! I know who has taken you from me! Now I will tell——"

"Child!" And a firm white hand on the girl's shoulder made her glance up fearfully into Lady Maitland's face. "Come, dear," her ladyship continued gently; "you are unstrung and shocked by what has happened; but your fears are exaggerated. Poor Jack is not dead, only very dangerously wounded; and you will make yourself ill if you do not control your grief."

Under Lady Maitland's even tone of reason the girl was silent, but the mild blue eyes of Gilbert Chase saw a strange light flash into her fevered eyes as she shrank beneath the

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gentle touch of the low-voiced woman who sought to comfort her.

"Not dead?" she murmured. "Jack not dead! Tell me, are you playing with me, or did——"

She stopped suddenly, as on her delicate shoulder she felt the slight fingers of her ladyship's hand.

"I will see that you are told everything that is wise and right for you to know, dear," said Lady Maitland slowly; "only you must obey me, now, and go to bed. Muriel will let you share her room, and I will have a message sent down to the lodge that you are staying with us. Come!"

She half led, half carried the resistless girl from the room, followed by the puzzled glance of Gilbert Chase.

When she returned from handing Ivy over to Muriel, she found the doctor had been and pronounced the wound to Jack's head serious, with possible complications, but luckily, though there was danger of brain fever ensuing, everything depended upon quiet and good nursing.

Lady Maitland gave all the necessary orders with a promptitude and conciseness that filled everyone with admiration. As she returned to the now deserted ball room, she came face to face with Gilbert Chase.

"The doctor is here," she said graciously; "would you not like to have your hand attended to? It may be a bad cut!"

He smiled, flattered by the interest of the great lady.

"Thank you, your ladyship; I don't fancy I shall feel it after a time. It is not a cut, but—a bite; which I shall not forget!"

Before she could make any remark, he said. "Could your ladyship tell me if there was a woman that bore Mr. Maitland a grudge?"

She shook her head. "I cannot. He was a most lovable boy! I can imagine no one wishing him harm. But are you certain that you passed no one else in the spinny besides that woman you saw? The neighbourhood has been troubled with burglars lately."

"I shall visit the spinny to-night, my lady," he said gravely. "I am Detective-Sergeant Chase of Scotland Yard," he introduced himself formally, making the announcement of his calling with a quiet dignity; "and no stone shall be left unturned to clear this up!"

"The spinny to-night!" she murmured; "but in that case, Mr. Chase, I insist upon your having some sandwiches and something to drink first. You may have a long ordeal awaiting you, and your strength needs keeping up to the mark."

She touched a bell, and gave instructions for the detective's refreshment, which he had not the courage to refuse, but as her ladyship was preparing to leave the room, the voice of Gilbert Chase recalled her:

"Forgive me, your ladyship; but may I ask if that—that young lady was anything particular to Mr. Maitland? She struck me as being unusually upset."

Lady Maitland smiled slightly. "Oh, that is the child of the lodgekeeper. She has been brought up a great deal with my step-children, and feels their troubles as her own. I do not fancy there is anything between them. She is apt to get hysterical at times and exaggerate matters."

Once outside the door, Sir Trevor Maitland's wife raised her right arm for an instant, moved a piece of black velvet that was fastened just above her wrist, and smiled slightly, before once again dropping it behind the folds of her domino, which she was still wearing instead of putting it on one side with her mask, as her guests had done.

"Please, your ladyship, Mr. Scarlett would like to speak to you," said a voice suddenly, and Mason, who seemed to have sprung from the earth, stood in front of her mistress, with a demure expression on her hard face.

"Where is Mr. Scarlett, Mason?" she said. "In one of the supper-rooms?"

"Yes, your ladyship," the woman replied; "I left him in the blue supper-room."

"Where is Sir Trevor?"

"With the doctor and Miss Muriel, your ladyship."

As Lady Maitland moved away, the woman looked after her with a vindictive gleam in her black eyes. "You're a sharp one!" she muttered, "those who wanted to catch you napping would have to sit up all night! But I'll get even with you one day, my lady!"

"Ah!" said Digby Scarlett, coming forward quickly, as Lady Maitland entered the room that had so recently been the scene of so much life and gaiety. "I am glad you have been able to spare me a few moments. I have come to ask you to convey to Sir Trevor my deep sympathy with him in the sudden bereavement that has fallen upon him!"

He spoke loudly, and Heriot North, who had hurried into the room excitedly, was struck by the apparent feeling in the voice of the man for whom he had entertained so little liking.

Lady Maitland turned quickly. "Ah, Mr. North," she said prettily, "will you go and see whether the man who brought poor Jack in wishes to make any more inquiries in the house before going back to the spinny?"

He assented readily to do her bidding, and she followed him to the door, leaving Digby Scarlett in the centre of the room, glaring after them with a sinister expression in his eyes.

"Keep that man in the Manor on *any* pretext!" she whispered; "until I have seen you in my boudoir. I will not be long!"

With a glance of tender chivalry into her face, he bowed his head, and Lady Maitland smilingly turned again to Digby Scarlett.

"I think there is a slight error, Mr. Scarlett," she said slowly. "Jack was carried in with a fearful wound in his head, and——"

"Is dead?" he interrupted quickly, his eyes glittering with a strange light.

She shook her head, and approaching him swiftly, said in a low tone: "No, he still lives, and good nursing will pull him through—perhaps! *Someone* bungled to-night, Mr. Scarlett!"

He started, and his dark face grew livid with a momentary fear and rage as he read her meaning.

"Not dead!" he muttered; then burst into a bitter laugh.

"I see, my condolences came too soon! But what makes your ladyship so anxious for him to live? Out of the way, my path—and yours—would be clearer; and the heir would be—your son, Woolf!"

For an instant their eyes met, hers with a fearful understanding in them—those of the man with the smile of the tempter lurking in their depths.

Suddenly she flung out her hand, as though to beat off the presence of evil.

"No, no!" she gasped, with trembling lips. "Not that—not that! I——"

She stopped, and her eyes gazed fascinated upon the lace ruffle of his fancy coat that he was still wearing, that of a gentleman of France.

"What is that?" she said hoarsely; "that stain!"

With an oath he tore off the ruffle and flung it into the fire; then turned to her savagely.

"I upset some claret a short time ago!" he snarled. "Your ladyship seems haunted by the colour!"

She shuddered and drew back.

"What do you mean! What—colour?"

He laughed, and leaning forward, whispered. "We are both in the same boat, my Lady of Maitland Manor! If you betray me, I can betray you—*doubly!* You hear! Doubly! So I warn you to remember that you and I run side by side; neither can get ahead of the other; we are comrades in——"

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The last word was barely breathed, but the face of Sir Trevor Maitland's wife grew strangely haggard and pale as she listened.

"I am going now," Digby Scarlett said abruptly; and without waiting for a response he left the room.

Outside the window a pair of gentle blue eyes looked curiously at the woman standing under the electric light.

"Her ladyship seems to feel it very much," the owner of the eyes muttered, walking away. "She's got a tender heart for others. But I wonder where I could have seen a face like hers before? I shall remember soon—that girl——"

He stopped, and drawing under a light that fell from one of the windows of the still brilliantly lit Manor, he opened a small notebook and read something that appeared to puzzle him.

"Now that young lady who said such wild words is what I should have imagined his sweetheart to be like! But this description of the girl I have sent up to town is that of the one I saw standing in the window! Quite pretty, but ordinary looking! And it will be some time before I can talk to him about the affair, poor chap—if I do then!"

* * * * *

"You see, I have waited as you commanded!" And Heriot North advanced towards Lady Maitland with an eager smile, that faded as he saw the white, pallid face of the woman who gazed up at him with burning eyes.

"Ah!" he said quickly, "you are ill; this untimely accident to poor Jack has been too much for you."

She made a gesture of impatience. "I am not ill," she replied slowly, "and it is not of—Jack—that I am thinking; but of something far more important, something that means life or death—honour or dishonour—and I look to you—the one man I can trust—to turn the tide of my misfortunes into the waters of peace and honour again. Do not refuse me!" she cried passionately. "You have given me your word—your sacred promise—you cannot withdraw it. I claim it now, and for all time!"

Madly, and with all the fascination of which she was so completely the mistress, she flung her appeal at his feet, and, dazzled, bewildered, wholly carried away by the force of her speech and the beauty of her face, he yielded, and listened to her words of wild intreaty.

"Why am I to do this in the dark?" he said. "Won't you give me your confidence—fully?"

She smiled wearily. "One day—you shall know—perhaps. I can say no more now!"

Just when the dawn was breaking in a dull, cloudy sky, two men were stooping in horror over two different things that struck a chill to their hearts, and sent a clammy moisture to their brows.

One was Heriot North. He was burning some things in a paper, and as the heat of the fire opened the parcel, he saw a handkerchief, dirty with dark stains, and a pair of pale green evening slippers, caked with mud, that he remembered having seen in their pristine daintiness.

"Great Heavens!" he exclaimed. "I am mad! This cannot be—it's monstrous!"

Then, with a sudden fear, he dug the poker into the flames, and stood over them till nothing remained in the grate but ashes; and with them was a man's honour, lying charred with the blackness of a harrowing doubt.

The other man was Gilbert Chase; and in the sullen grey of the early morning he recoiled from some inert bundle he had come across in his wanderings in the spinny. He stirred it with his foot; it was strangely unresponsive; and, with a tightening of his breath, he turned it over, where the light could fall full on it.

Then, with a stifled cry, he started back. For the face of the "thing" he had found so strangely was the face of the ex-convict, Mike Holland—hideous and awful in death, as in life; and by his side, the brown earth was stained a dark, ominous red!

(Another long instalment next week.)

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"So this winds the thing up, does it, Miss Angus?"

"It does, Mr. Penton."

"And you haven't any explanation to give?"

"What explanation do you want? I have told you I wished to break off the engagement because it has become irksome to me. Isn't that enough?"

Algernon Penton, with a low bow, turned upon his heel and walked out. When the door had closed upon his retreating form the young woman sank nervelessly into a chair.

"The stupid wretch!" she exclaimed. "He ought to have had more sense than to take me at my word!"

Suddenly she stooped to the floor, picked up a small ivory tablet that had dropped from Algernon's pocket, pressed it passionately to her lips, bowed her head upon her hands, and sobbed aloud.

* * * * *

Years had passed. The afternoon sun was gilding the pretentious spires and cupolas of a small town when a middle-aged man with a bag in his hand opened the gate in front of a modest, but neat and well-built house, walked briskly up the steps and knocked at the door.

A lady answered the knock—a lady well-preserved but no longer young.

The stranger bared his head. His hair was beginning to turn grey, but time had evidently dealt with him leniently, and care had left no deep traces on his brow. He spoke:

"Is the gentleman of the house—am I dreaming? Isn't this Elsie Angus? Or, rather"—and he smiled, "isn't this the lady that was once Miss Elsie Angus?"

"I am Miss Angus," she answered, "and you are Algernon Penton. I recognised you as soon as I saw you. Won't you come in?"

"Well, well!" said the middle-aged traveller, as he sat in an easy chair in the front parlour a few minutes later, and looked with interest at the face of the lady, "who would have thought of meeting you here? And you tell me you are still Miss Angus? Is this your home?"

"It is my brother's. He is a widower. I keep house for him."

"And you have never married?"

"No."

"How have you prospered?"

"I—I have no reason for complaint. And you?"

"I have had a great many hard knocks, Elsie—Miss Angus—since we last met. By the way, we parted rather unceremoniously, didn't we?"

The lady sighed.

"And I have always felt that I owed you an apology," he continued, "for not sending your photograph back after you had returned mine, but the fact is," he went on awkwardly, "I—er—couldn't find it. It had got lost somehow."

Miss Angus sighed again.

"That reminds me," pursued Mr. Penton, "that I lost a little book-slate the last evening I was at your house. I must have dropped it out of my pocket in some way. It wasn't of any particular value, and I don't know when I have thought of it before, but the recollection of it happened to occur to me just now. It was a little black book-slate, with——"

"I think it was an ivory tablet."

"No, I am quite positive it was a little black book-slate."

"I am sure it was a white tablet."

Going to the mantel she opened a plush-lined jewel-case and took out a little ivory tablet.

"Here it is," she said.

"And you have kept it all these years?" exclaimed Mr. Penton.

"Yes."

"I see I was mistaken. But to change the subject. Do you consider yourself—aw—settled in life? Have you no—no plans for the—for the future?"

"Why, I——"

She paused, and her visitor proceeded:

"In a sense, I suppose you are a fixture here? Your brother's children are to some extent dependent upon you?"

"Of course, but——"

"Then permit me, Miss Angus, for the sake of old times," said Mr. Penton rapidly, as he opened his bag and took out a number of documents, "to call your attention to the fact that life is uncertain, disease and death stalk abroad in the land, fatal accidents may happen at any time, and it is the part of wisdom to provide against contingencies by securing those who are or may be dependent upon us against want. In the policies of the Limpinlazarus Life Insurance Company, which I represent, and for which I have travelled for the last seven years, you will find the most perfect system, the surest guarantee, the most absolute security offered by any company in the world, and either on the ten-year, the endowment, or the life plan, as you may prefer, you will find the premiums smaller in proportion to the gilt-edged character of the insurance afforded than in any that has ever come under your notice, while the non-forfeitable features of the policies, peculiar to our company alone, together with the dividends that accrue after the third year, thus steadily decreasing the annual premiums, while at the same time——"

"Was this your object in calling, Mr. Penton?"

"It was, Miss Angus. I've just begun to work this town."

Opening the little ivory tablet he began jotting figures down in it with great rapidity.

"Now here, you will see," he said, "that on the ten-year plan—let me see, what is your age, please?"

"You will please excuse me, sir. I have some bread in the oven that I must go and look at, and I don't need any life insurance. Neither does my brother. I wish you success, Mr. Penton. Good afternoon."

Miss Elsie Angus sat in pensive silence a minute or two after her caller had departed, then picked up the little ivory tablet, put it back into the plush-covered jewel-case, took them both out to the kitchen, tossed them into the fire, and went about her work with a firm and decided expression on her face.

Three weeks afterwards she married a bald-headed dentist, fifty-seven years old, who had been making love to her unsuccessfully for about ten years.

Arthur Charles.

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Johnny Couldn't Have Seen.

"Mary, Johnny tells me that when he went into the dining-room last night he saw Mr. Bliff with his arms round your waist." "What a story, mamma! Why, the gas was out."

No Need to Worry.

Mr. Nuwed (gloomily): "My salary has been cut down ten per cent." Mrs. Nuwed (cheerily): "Oh! don't worry about that, dear! Silk, Ribbons and Co. are advertising perfectly lovely things at a reduction of twenty per cent."

Pity to Spoil the Look.

Mrs. Luneleigh (shopping with her husband): "Oh, George, look here! Doesn't this showcase of diamonds look perfectly beautiful?" Mr. Luneleigh: "Yes, love. It would be a shame to take anything away from it, wouldn't it?"

Plenty of Time Yet.

"Better not wait for Charley any longer. You know what it is when a fellow is calling on his girl." "Ah, there they are now! He is just bidding her good-night." "All right; let us go and have a game of billiards. We'll just have time."

Thinking of the Lost.

Maggie: "Marie's engagement has been broken off." Minnie: "Is that a fact? Poor girl! I saw her sitting at the window as I came by." "Yes; she likes to sit at the window and admire the hieroglyphics she cut on the glass with the ring she had to send back."

An Unpleasant Reminder.

Mr. Spooner (on being introduced to Adored One's Mother): "Pardon me, madam, but have we not met before? Your face seems strangely familiar." Adored One's Mother: "Yes; I am the woman who stood up before you for three miles in a tramcar the other day while you sat reading the paper."

Is a Nobleman a Man?

Mr. Graves (Chicago soap merchant): "I say, Elfrida, you've got to break off with that Baron Sourcrout." Miss Graves: "Why, p-p-papa?" Mr. Graves: "Well, a fellow this morning told me that I won't be any more of a baron than I am now after your marriage, and if I ain't a-going ter be a noble yo'll 'av' ter marry a *man*."

A Bit too Nervous.

A youthful typine had just been engaged by a prominent lawyer. She had never done regular work before, and was somewhat nervous. The lawyer settled himself back in his chair and began dictating a brief. He talked for about five minutes, when the girl stopped with a horrified look on her face. "What's the matter?" asked the lawyer. "Would you mind saying that all over again?" the girl asked, her eyes full of tears. "Why?" "I forgot to put paper in the machine."

Knew the Symptoms.

Young Man: "Doctor, I have no appetite." Doctor (diagnosing case at a glance): "Then why don't you marry the girl?"

The Price of Memory.

"I'm afraid that if you marry my daughter she'll learn to forget me." "If you feel that way, you might let her see your name on a cheque about once a month."

He Wasn't Acting.

She: "Take your arm from about my waist at once, sir! I never saw a man act so in all my whole life!" He: "You mistake me, dear. I'm not acting, I'm in earnest."

She had Dared Him.

Mother: "I saw him kiss you; I am terribly shocked! I did not for a moment imagine he would dare take such a liberty!" Herself: "Nor did I, mamma—in fact, I bet him he daren't!"

Not in the Cold Storage Trade.

"Could you not, if you tried, grant me a place in that icy heart of yours?" "My heart may be of ice, as you say, Mr. Sopleigh, but all the same I am not in the cold storage business."

Earned, Not Won.

She: "He was desperately in love with her. Why, he sent her costly flowers and presents nearly every day for two years." He: "Did he finally win her?" She: "No, he earned her."

His Sight was Bad.

He: "Do you know that for the last hour I have been watching for a good chance to steal a kiss from you?" She: "Indeed! Don't you think it might be well for you to consult an oculist?"

Danger Ahead!

"Do you know," said an extremely vivacious young lady to her excessively bashful suitor, "do you know, George, that young ladies like to be told they are pretty and attractive, whether they are or not?" "I would not think of telling you any such thing," said George gallantly, "for your looking-glass tells you better than I could that you are as handsome as a picture." "Oh, George!" "You have the prettiest face and the smallest waist I ever saw." "The smallest waist? If my waist is small, it is certainly not because of having been squeezed, George." George fainted.

The Vow not Broken.

He: "I hear Maud Watkins is going to be married." She: "Yes, and not a great while ago she told me she had decided never to marry." He: "Oh, that goes for nothing. You women can't keep a vow any better than you can keep a secret. And you, my dear, you have no cause to talk about Maud. I remember you said to me once you would not marry the best man living." She: "Did I say so?" He: "Of course you did, and in less than six months you had married me—ha, ha, ha! There is something amusing about the make-up of a woman." She: "I don't see where the laugh comes in. I can't see that I broke my vow."

Forgiven.

"Clara," said William Wharton, as he placed his arms round his wife and looked down into her eyes, "I have a confession to make to you, and I want you to promise, before I begin it, that you will forgive me." A wild fear took possession of her. She placed a little white hand upon her heart, and would have fallen if her husband had not held her up. Her face became livid, and she could only gasp: "Tell me—tell me what it is!" "I cheated a man out of £50 to-day," he said. "Can you, darling—can you forgive me?" The colour came back into her cheeks, her lips parted in a glad, sweet smile, she rested her head against his breast, and, looking fondly up to his eyes, said: "Oh, Will, dear, how you frightened me! I thought you were going to tell me that you had kissed your typine!"

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Neuralgia

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Does She Know Her Own Mind?

"I AM very much in love with a girl of seventeen," writes "EDWARD." "She owns that she returns the feeling. Do you think at her age, she knows her own mind, or is it merely a passing fancy?"

* * * * *

It depends so much on the girl. If she is a flighty girl, then it is very likely as she grows older that she will develop other fancies. If she is quiet and domesticated, and not too fond of the men generally, you might depend on it that she is true in her professions towards you.

Should a Girl Pay Expenses?

"SHOULD a girl pay her own expenses when out with her sweetheart?" asks "S. P.," who often takes out a certain young lady, and always insists on paying everything himself. The girl, however, protests, as she says she can afford to share expenses, being herself in a good position, earning a good salary. They have known each other for three or four years now.

* * * * *

I certainly think this is a case in which the girl might well pay her own expenses. She says she can afford it, and therefore ought not to depend for everything on you, who no doubt have many expenses of your own to deal with. Certainly in the matter of fares, and meals, if you have them together, it seems fair that you should allow her to share. You know each other well enough, I suppose, to be able to make such an arrangement without misunderstanding each other's motives.

Shabby Sweethearting.

"DOT" and "MAUDE" got acquainted with two young men from a neighbouring town, and in time grew affectionate with them, giving them their photos. After having won their regard, the two men wrote and said they had finished with the girls, but refused to return the photos or letters when asked. The two girls are being ridiculed over the affair, and wish to know how they can get back their photos and letters.

* * * * *

The men acted in a very shabby way towards you, and deserve very severe reproof. In this case a girl is better off if she has a brother, or a male relative she can trust, who would not mind taking up the matter for her. If the two young men were all along trifling with you, and secured your photos under false pretences, you have a right to demand them back—not legally, of course, for they were gifts—but you could request the photos to be returned by a certain date, and unless this were done, your brother or father would take the matter up. Men who deceive girls, and allow them to write intimate letters in good faith, and who finally act as these two have done, lay themselves open to severe handling.

Etiquette Questions.

"ETIQUETTE."—Yes, you should always escort a lady walking yourself on the side nearest the road. The reason is obvious. In the event of any accident, or splashes of mud from passing vehicles, the man is supposed to bear the first instalment of trouble. Another problem from "B. F." asks: "When entering a railway carriage with a lady, who should enter first, and supposing there to be a vacant corner seat, who should take it? In the same way, who should leave the carriage first?"

* * * * *

The girl should, of course, enter the carriage first, the man holding open the door, and shutting it after her. As to the corner seat, if it is next the door by which people enter and leave, the man ought to take the corner. He is then there to open or shut the door or perform any other courtesy that may be necessary, such as opening or closing a window. On leaving the carriage, the man steps out first, and helps the lady to descend—at some railway stations a very practical service, where the carriage step is very high above the platform.

How Can a Girl Help with Moneymaking?

"WILLING" is a nurse who is engaged, but to a man who has only a very small, unprogressive salary. She asks me how she can help towards preparing their home by work on her own account until her sweetheart has improved his position.

* * * * *

I am afraid the only ways open to a girl nowadays for earning money to save require a certain amount of education. For instance, a girl who can undertake typewriting in her spare time can often make a good deal, or if she is musical and able to play any instrument or sing fairly well, a little money can be made in that way. But without some kind of accomplishment there are very few chances to add to one's income.

* * * * *

All I can recommend to "WILLING" is that she should try to get a better situation than she has at present by making herself a really competent nurse, and to apply for situations in better families. There is always room for a good upper-servant in good families, and if "WILLING" got some such place she ought to be able to save the necessary money.

Church Choir Overtures.

"O. B." attends a church regularly, and while there has taken a great fancy to one of the choir girls. He, however, has had no introduction to her, or any mutual friends. She always stares very hard at him, both in church and out of it. Is "O. B." to take this as a sign that she wishes to know him?

* * * * *

I am afraid it is a habit with many girls—especially in choirs—to stare at young men worshippers, often meaningly, and often otherwise. Under the circumstances you must use your own judgment. As you belong to the same congregation, and presumably are neighbours, it should not be very difficult to get to know her family.

* * * * *

Perhaps you know the vicar, curate, or some of the churchwardens, who would be able to introduce you to the girl's family. That would be better both for her and you than to start a casual acquaintance. As another resort, why not join the choir yourself—provided that you can sing, and they have men's voices. I have known lasting attachments spring up through people being associated with each other in choirs and other church matters.

Cynthia

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